The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN MYSTERY MAGAZINE

DOUBLE ISSUE!

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2007

In The Grip of Suspense

Lawrence Block
Marcia Muller
Bill Pronzini
Ed Gorman
Laura Benedict
Clark Howard

$5.99 U.S. $7.99 CAN.

10

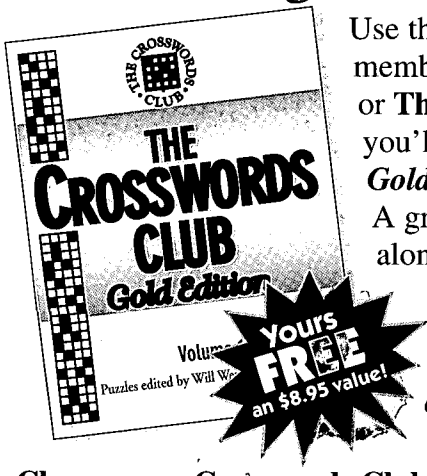
0 74470 08599 7

www.themysteryplace.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FREE BONUS BOOK

With every elite Crosswords Club gift membership!



Use the coupon below to give a gift membership to **The Crosswords Club** or **The Uptown Puzzle Club** and you'll receive ***The Crosswords Club Gold Edition*** book **FREE!** A great gift for yourself...or to give along with your gift subscription!

64 pages packed with some of our most entertaining puzzles ever!

Choose your Crosswords Club Gift:
***The Crosswords Club** - Six original high-quality themed crosswords per month.
***The Uptown Puzzle Club** - Five completely new crosswords per month from the best puzzle constructors in the country.

Order TOLL-FREE: 1-800-433-4386 (8am-7pm, EST)

Mail to: ***The Crosswords Club*** • *Dept. S, 6 Prowitt St.* • *Norwalk, CT 06855-1220*

❑ ***YES!*** Enter a 1-year gift membership as indicated below and send me *The Crosswords Club Gold Edition Vol. 1* (XWGFR) for **FREE!**

❑ *The Crosswords Club* (XWC)
1 year/$39.95

❑ *The Uptown Puzzle Club* (UTC)
1 year/$35.00

Allow up to 4 weeks for delivery of first issue. **Outside the USA:** Canada and Mexico add $10 per membership per year. All other foreign countries add $25 per membership per year.

Send to _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

Your name _____

Address _____

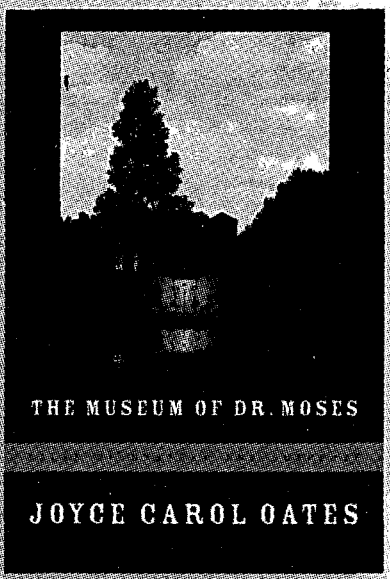
City _____

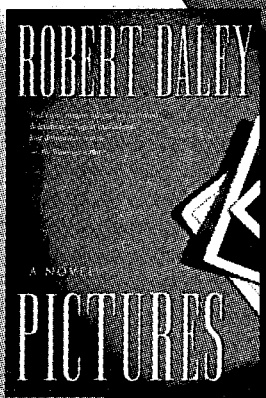
State _____ ZIP _____

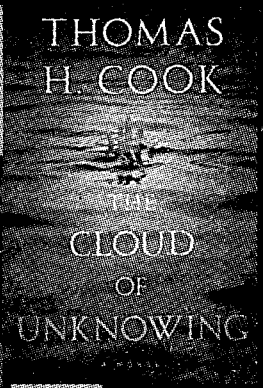
Offer expires September 30, 2008. **67C-NZ3CLL**

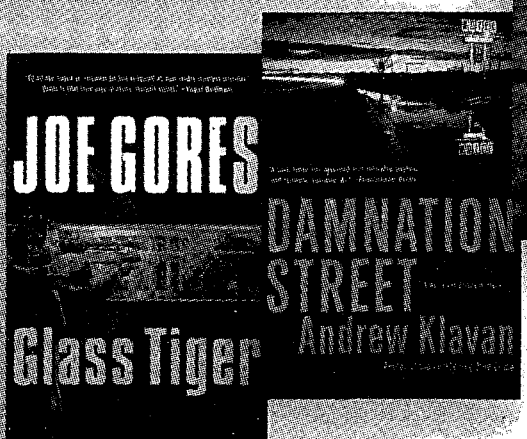
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Harcourt & Otto Penzler:
Partners in Crime









What to Read Next?
Mystery Solved.

www.HarcourtBooks.com/Mystery/
Harcourt

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CONTENTS

Dead, or alive?
Page 62

Murderer's dance
Page 116

Cover illustration by
John Scott 1939

FICTION

The Carville Ghost
BY BILL PRONZINI 4

Pickpocket
BY MARCIA MULLER 26

The Erstwhile Groom
BY LAURA BENEDICT 38

Remote Control
BY MICK HERRON 49

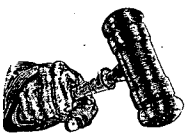
A Rat's Tale
BY DONNA ANDREWS 58

The Profane Angel
BY LOREN D. ESTLEMAN 62

Limpopo
BY SHEILA KOHLER 75

The World in Primary Colors
BY SCOTT WILLIAM CARTER 86

Parson Pennywick and the Whirligig
BY AMY MYERS 116



Dell Magazines
475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY
10016

REVIEWS

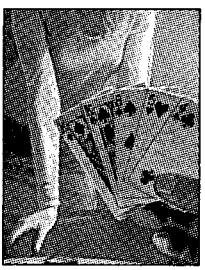
The Jury Box
BY JON L. BREEN 25

Blog Bytes
BY BILL CRIDER 57

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER '07

The White Queen
Page 172



High stakes
Page 228

Note: indicia on page 240

www.themysteryplace.com

FICTION

A Cozy for the Jack-o'-lanterns
BY JAMES POWELL 130

Moon Madness
BY TOM TOLNAY 157

Ideas in My Head
BY JANICE LAW 163

The Theft of the Ostracized Ostrich
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 172

Blues in the Kabul Night
BY CLARK HOWARD 185

Scream Queen
BY ED GORMAN 210

A Chance to Get Even
BY LAWRENCE BLOCK 228

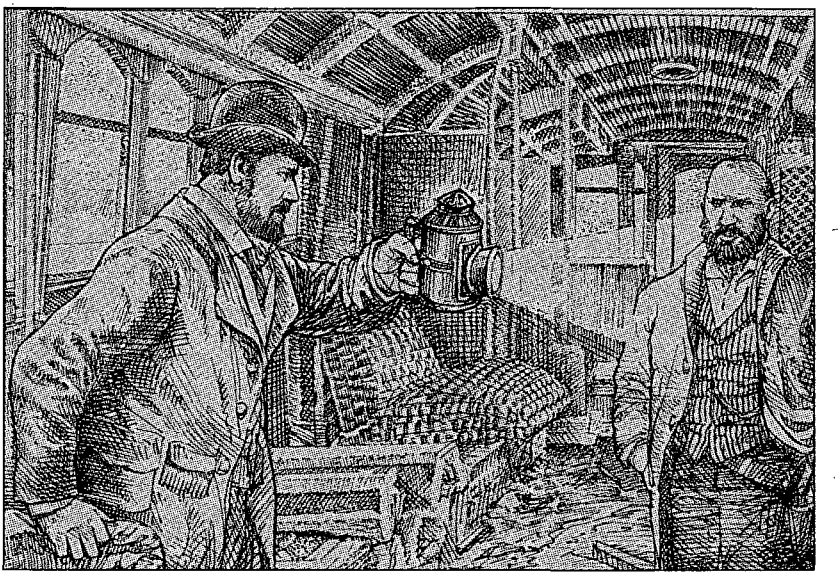
DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

Camera Guy
BY MARK BARSOTTI 99

PASSPORT TO CRIME

No Bones About It
BY MARC R. SOTO 139

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Allen Davis

THE CARVILLE GHOST

by Bill Pronzini

Sabina said, "A ghost?"

Barnaby Meeker bobbed his shaggy head. "A strange apparition of unknown origin, Mrs. Carpenter. I've seen it with my own eyes more than once."

"In Carville, of all places?"

"In a scattering of abandoned cars near my home there. Floating about inside different ones and then rushing out across the dunes."

"How can a group of abandoned horse-traction cars possibly be haunted?"

"How, indeed?" Meeker said mournfully. "How, indeed?"

"And you say this apparition fled when you chased after it?"

"Not once but both times I saw it. Bounded away across the dune tops and then simply vanished into thin air. Well, into heavy mist, to be completely accurate."

"What did it look like, exactly?"

"A human shape surrounded by a whitish glow. Never have I seen a more eerie and frightening sight."

"And it left no footprints behind?"

"None. Ghosts don't leave footprints, do they?"

©2007 by Bill Pronzini

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"If it was a ghost."

"The dune crests were unmarked along the thing's path of flight and it left no trace in the cars—except, that is, for claw marks on the walls and floors. What else could it be?"

Quincannon, who had been listening to all of this with a stoic mien, could restrain himself no longer. "Balderdash," he said emphatically.

Sabina and Barnaby Meeker both glanced at him in a startled way, as if they'd forgotten he was present in the office.

"Glowing apparitions, sudden disappearances, unmarked sand . . . confounded claptrap, the lot." He added for good measure, "Bah!"

Meeker was offended. He drew himself up in his chair, his cheeks and chest both puffing like a toad's. "If you doubt my word, sir . . ."

It's not your word I doubt but your sanity, Quincannon thought, but he managed not to voice the opinion. "There are no such beings as ghosts," he said.

"Three days ago I would have agreed with you. But after what I've seen with my own eyes, my own eyes, I repeat, I am no longer certain of anything."

Sabina stirred behind her desk. Pale March sunlight, slanting in through the windows that faced on Market Street, created shimmering highlights in her upswept black hair. It also threw across the desk's polished surface the shadow of the words painted on the window glass: *Carpenter and Quincannon, Professional Detective Services.*

She said, "Others saw the same as you, Mr. Meeker?"

"My wife, my son, and a neighbor, Artemus Crabb. They will vouchsafe everything I have told you."

"What time of night did these events take place?"

"After midnight, in all three cases. Crabb was the only one who saw the thing the first time it appeared. I happened to awaken on the second night and spied it in one of the cars. I went out alone to investigate, but it fled and vanished before I could reach the cars. Lucretia, my wife, and my son Jared both saw it last night—in one of the cars and then on the dune tops. Jared and I examined the cars by lantern light and again in the morning by daylight. The

Bill Pronzini is the author of 66 novels, including three in collaboration with his wife, Marcia Muller, and 32 in his popular "Nameless Detective" series. (See *Savages*, Forge, '07). He is a multiple Shamus Award winner, and a recipient of both the PWA's Lifetime Achievement Award and France's *Grand Prix de la Littérature Policière*. A character from this story is borrowed by Marcia Muller for her story on p. 26. ☨

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

marks on walls and floor were the only evidence of its presence."

"Claw marks, you said?"

Meeker repressed an involuntary shudder. "As if the thing had the talons of a beast."

Quincannon said, "And evidently the heart of a coward."

"Sir?"

"Why else would it run away or bound away or whatever it did? It's humans who are afraid of ghosts, not the converse."

"I have no explanation for what happened," Meeker said. "That is why I have come to you."

"And just what do you expect us to do? Mrs. Carpenter and I are detectives, not dabblers in paranormal twaddle."

Again Meeker puffed up. He was an oddly shaped gent in his forties, with an abnormally large head set on a narrow neck and a slight body. A wild tangle of curly hair made his head seem even larger and more disproportionate. He carried a blackthorn walking stick, which he held between his knees and thumped on the floor now and then for emphasis.

"What I want is an explanation for these bizarre occurances. Normal or paranormal, it matters not to me, as long as they are explained to my satisfaction. If they continue and word gets out, residents will leave and no new ones come to take their place. Carville will become a literal ghost town."

"And you don't want this to happen."

"Of course not. Carville-by-the-Sea is my home and one day it will be the home of many other progressive-minded citizens like myself. Businesses, churches—a thriving community. Why, no less a personage than Adolph Sutro hopes to persuade wealthy San Franciscans to buy land there and build grand estates like his own at Sutro Heights."

A cracked filbert, Mr. Barnaby Meeker, Quincannon thought. Anyone who chose of his own free will to live in a home fashioned of abandoned street cars in an isolated, fog-ridden, wind-and-sand-blown place like Carville was welcome to the company of other cracked filberts, Adolph Sutro and his ilk included. He had no patience with eccentrics of any stripe, a sentiment he had expressed to Sabina on more than one occasion. She allowed as how that was because he was one himself, but he forgave her. Dear Sabina—he would forgive her anything. Except, perhaps, her steadfast refusal to succumb to his advances . . .

"I will pay you five hundred dollars to come to Carville and view the phenomenon for yourself," Barnaby Meeker said.

"Eh? What's that?"

"Five hundred dollars, sir. And an additional one thousand dollars if you can provide a satisfactory explanation for these fantastic goings-on."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Quincannon's ears pricked up like a hound's. "Fifteen hundred dollars?"

"If, as I said, you provide a satisfactory explanation."

"Can you afford such a large sum, Mr. Meeker?"

"Of course I can afford it," Meeker said, bristling. "Would I offer it if I couldn't?"

"Ah, I ask only because—"

"Only because of where I choose to reside." Meeker thumped his stick to punctuate his testy displeasure. "It so happens I am a man of considerable means, sir. Railroad stock, if you must know—a substantial portfolio. I have made my home in Carville because I have always been fond of the ocean and the solitude of the dunes. Does that satisfy you?"

"It does." Quincannon's annoyance and suspicion had both vanished as swiftly as the alleged Carville ghost. A smile now bisected his freebooter's beard, the sort Sabina referred to rather unkindly as his greedy grin. "I meant no offense. You may consider us completely at your service."

"John," Sabina said, "let's not be hasty. You know how busy we are . . ."

"Now, now, my dear," he said. "Mr. Meeker has come in good faith with a vexing problem. We can certainly find the time and wherewithal to oblige him."

"And naturally you'll keep an open mind in the process."

Quincannon chose to ignore her mocking tone. He rose, beamed at the cracked filbert, shook his hand with enthusiasm, and said, "Now, to business . . ."

When Barnaby Meeker had gone, leaving a five-hundred-dollar check, neatly blotted, on Sabina's desk, she said, "I'm not so sure it was a good idea to take on this case."

"No? And why not, with five hundred dollars in hand and another thousand promised?"

"We've a full plate already, John. Or have you forgotten the pickpocket case, the missing Miss Devereaux, and the Wells Fargo Express robbery?"

"Hardly. You'll identify the amusement park dip, we'll find Miss Devereaux, and I have no doubt I'll locate the Wells Fargo bandits and recover the stolen loot before anyone else can—all in good time." Quincannon rubbed his hands together briskly and opined, "This ghost foolishness can be disposed of in short order tonight. Fifteen hundred dollars is a handsome fee for a few hours' easy work."

"Don't be too sure it will be easy. Or that it's foolishness."

"Of course it is," he said. "Ghoulies, ghosties, things that go bump in the night. Pure hogwash."

Late that afternoon, huddled inside his greatcoat, Quincannon

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drove the hired livery horse and buggy out past Cliff House and Sutro Heights. A chill southwesterly wind blew curls and twists of fog in off the Pacific; the mist was already thick enough to hide the sea from the road, though he could hear the distant murmur of surf and the barking of sea lions. The foghorn on the Potato Patch off Point Lobos gave off its mournful moan at regular intervals.

This was a bleak, lonesome section of the city, sparsely traveled beyond the Heights. As he rattled past the Ocean Boulevard turning into Golden Gate Park, a lone wagon emerged from the jungle-like tangle of scrub pine and manzanita that marked the park's western edge; otherwise he saw no one. Empty sand-blown roadway, grass-topped dunes, gulls, fog . . . a blasted wasteland. There were no lampposts here, south of the park. At night, in heavy fog, the highway was virtually impassable, even with the strongest of lanterns, to all but the blind and the foolhardy.

The sea mist thinned and thickened at intervals until he reached Carville, where it roiled in like a ragged gray shroud spread out over the barren dunes. Carville-by-the-Sea. Faugh. Some name for a scattering of weather-rusted streetcars and cobbled-together board shacks that had been turned into habitations of one type or another by filberts such as Barnaby Meeker.

San Francisco's transit companies were the culprits. When the city began replacing horse-drawn cars with cable cars and electric streetcars, some of the obsolete carriages had been sold to individuals for ten dollars if the car had no seats, twenty dollars if it did; the rest were abandoned out here among the dunes, awaiting new buyers or to succumb to rust and rot in the salty sea winds. A gripman for the Ellis Street line had been the first to see the nesting possibilities; in 1895, after purchasing a lot near the terminus of 20th Avenue, he had joined three old North Beach & Mission horse-cars and mounted them on stilts above the shifting sand. The edifice was still standing three years later; Quincannon had passed it on the way, a lonesome sight half-obscured by the blowing mist.

Farther south, where the Park and Ocean railway line terminated, a Civil War vet named Colonel Charles Daily made his home in a shell-decorated realtor's shed. An entrepreneur, Daily had bought three cars and rented them at five dollars each—one to a ladies' bicycle club known as "The Falcons"—and also opened a coffee saloon. Others, Barnaby Meeker among them, bought their own cars and set them up in the vicinity. A reporter for the *Bulletin* dubbed the place Beachside, but residents preferred Carville-by-the-Sea and the general public shortened that to Carville.

Quincannon had been there before, once on an outing with a young woman of his acquaintance, once on the trail of a thief who had used the ragtag community as a temporary hideout before

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

taking it on the lammas to San Jose. It had grown since his last visit over a year ago. Most of the structures were strung close together along the highway, a few others spaced widely apart among the seaward dunes. Most were more or less permanent homes—single or double-stacked cars, some drawn together in horseshoe shapes for protection against the wind, and embellished by lean-tos and fenced porches. A few were part-time dwellings—clubhouses, weekend retreats, or, by reputation, rendezvous for lovers. The whole had a colorless, windblown, sanded appearance that blue sky and sunlight did little to brighten; on days like this one, it was downright dismal.

The coffee saloon, a single car with a slant-roofed portico, bore a painted sign: *The Annex*. Smoke dribbled out of its chimney, to be snatched away immediately by the wind. Quincannon pulled the buggy off the road in front, affixed the weighted hitch-strap to the horse's bit, and went inside.

It was a rudimentary place, with a narrow foot-railed counter running most of its width. There were no seats or decorations of any kind. The smells of strong-brewed cofee and pitch pine burning in a potbellied stove were welcome after the long, cold ride from downtown.

The counterman was a stooped oldster with white whiskers and tufts of hair that grew patchily from his scalp like saw grass atop the beach dunes. Quincannon sensed immediately that he was the garrulous type hungry for company and this proved to be the case.

"One coffee coming up," the oldster said, and as he served it in a steaming mug, "Colder than a witch's hind end out there. My name's Potter, but call me Caleb, ever'body does. Passing by or visiting, are ye?"

"John Quincannon. Visiting."

"Ye don't mind me asking who?"

"The Barnaby Meekers."

"Nice folks, Mr. and Mrs. Meeker. The boy's a mite rascally, but then so was I at his age. You a friend of theirs?"

"A business acquaintance of Mr. Meeker." Quincannon sugared his coffee, found it too strong, and added another spoonful. "Strange goings-on out here of late, I understand," he said conversationally.

"How's that? Strange goings-on?"

"Ghost lights in cars and vanishing spooks in the dunes."

"Oh, that," Caleb said. "Mr. Meeker told you, I expect."

"He did."

"Well, I ain't one to dispute a man like Barnaby Meeker, nor any other man with two good eyes, but it's a tempest in a teapot, ye ask me."

"You haven't seen these apparitions yourself, then?"

"No, and nobody else has, neither, except the Meekers and a fella

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

name of Crabb. Neighbor of theirs out there in the dunes." Caleb leaned forward and said confidentially, even though there was no one else in the car, "Just between you and me, I wouldn't put too much stock in what Mr. Crabb says on the subject."

"Why is that?"

"Well, he's kind of a queer bird. Wouldn't think it to look at him, as strapping as he be, but he's scared to death of the supernatural. Come in here the morning after he first seen the will-o'-the-wisp or whatever it was and he was white as a ghost himself. Asked me all sorts of questions about spooks and such, whether we'd had 'em out here before. I told him no and 'twas likely somebody out with a lantern, or his eyes playing tricks, but he was convinced he seen the ghost two nights in a row." Caleb chuckled, revealing loose-fitting store-bought teeth. "Some folks is sure gullible."

"He lives alone, does he?" Quincannon asked.

"Yep. Keeps to himself, don't have much truck with any of the rest of us. Only been living in Carville a couple of weeks or so. Squatter, unless I miss my guess. I can spot 'em, the ones just move in all of a sudden and take over a car without paying for the privilege."

"What does he do for a living?"

"He never said. Mr. Meeker's boy Jared says he's a construction worker, but seems to me he don't go nowhere much during the day."

"Jared Meeker knows him, then."

"To pass the time of day with. Seen 'em doing that once."

Quincannon finished his coffee, declined a refill, and went out to the rented buggy. The branch lane that led to the Meekers' home was two hundred rods further south. The buggy alternately bounced and slogged along the sandy surface; once, a hidden rut lifted Quincannon off the seat and made him pull back hard enough on the reins to nearly jerk the horse's head through the martingale loops. Neither this nor the cold wind nor the bleakness dampened his spirits. A few minor discomforts were a small price to pay for a fifteen-hundred-dollar fee.

The lane led in among the dunes, dipped down into a hollow where it split into two forks. A driftwood sign mounted on a pole there bore the name Meeker and an arrow pointing along the right fork. In that direction Quinncannon could see a group of four traction cars, two set end to end, the others at a right and a left angle at the far ends, like an arrangement of dominoes; mist-diffused lamplight showed faintly behind curtained windows in one of the two middle cars. A ways down the left fork stood a single car canted slightly against the dune behind it; some distance beyond, eight or nine abandoned cars were jumbled together among the sand hills as if tossed there by a giant's hand. Thick tendrils of fog gave them an insubstantial, almost ethereal aspect,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one that would be enhanced by darkness and imagination. A ghost's lair, indeed.

Quincannon left the buggy at the intersection of the two lanes, ground-hitched the horse, and trudged through drifted sand along the left-hand fork. No lights or chimney smoke showed in the single canted car; he bypassed it and continued on to the jumble.

From the outside there was nothing about any of the abandoned cars to catch the eye. They were or had been painted in various colors, according to which transit company owned them; half had been there long enough for the colors to fade entirely and the metal and glass surfaces to become sand-pitted. Three had belonged to the Market Street Railway, four to the Ferries and Cliff House Railway, the remaining two to the California Street Cable Railroad.

Quincannon wound his way among them. No one had prowled here recently; the sand was wind-scoured to a smoothness that bore no footprints or anything other than tufts of saw grass. He trudged back to the nearest one, stepped up and inside. All the seats had been removed; he had a brief and unpleasant feeling of standing inside a giant steel coffin. There was nothing in it other than a dusting of sand that had blown in through the open doorway. And no signs that anyone had been inside since it was discarded.

He investigated a second car, then a third. These, too, had had their seats removed. Only the second contained anything to take his attention: faint scuff marks in the drifted sand, the fresh claw-like scratches on walls and floor that Barnaby Meeker had alluded to. The source and meaning of the scratches defied accurate guessing. He stepped outside, with the intention of entering the next nearest car—and a man appeared suddenly from around the end of the car, stood glowering with his hands fisted on his hips and his legs spread, and demanded, "Who are you? What're you doing here?"

Without replying, Quincannon took his measure. He was some shy of forty, heavily black-whiskered but bald on top, with thick arms and hips broader than his shoulders. The staring eyes were the size and color of blackberries. The man seemed edgy as well as suspicious. None of this was as arresting as the fact that he wore a holstered revolver, the tail of his coat swept back and his hand on the weapon's gnarled butt—a large-bore Bisley Colt, judging from its size.

"Mister, I asked you who you are and what you're doing here."

"Having a look around. My name's Quincannon. And you, I expect, would be Artemus Crabb."

"How the devil d'you know my name?"

"Barnaby Meeker mentioned it."

"Is that so? Meeker a friend of yours?"

"Business acquaintance."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That still don't explain what you're doing poking around these cars."

"I'm thinking of buying some of them," Quincannon lied glibly.

"Why?"

"For the same reason you and Meeker bought yours. You did buy yours, didn't you?"

Crabb's glower deepened. "Who says I didn't?"

"A curious question, my friend, that's all."

"You're damn curious about everything, ain't you?"

"It's my nature." Quincannon smiled. "Ghosts and goblins," he said then.

"What?" Crabb jerked as if he'd been struck. The hand hovering above the holstered Bisley shook visibly. "What're you talking about?"

"Why, I understand these cars are haunted. Fascinating, if true."

"It ain't true! Ain't no such things as ghosts!"

"It has been my experience that there are. Oh, the tales I could tell you of the spirit world and its evil manifestations—"

"I don't want to hear it, I don't believe none of it," Crabb said, but it was plain that he did. And that the prospect frightened him as much as Caleb Potter had indicated.

"Mr. Meeker tells me you've seen the apparition that inhabits these cars. Dancing lights, a glowing shape that races across the tops of dunes and then vanishes, poof, without a trace—"

"I ain't gonna talk about that. No, I ain't!"

"I find the subject intriguing," Quincannon said. "As a matter of fact, I'm hoping there is a ghost and that it occupies the very car I purchase. I'd welcome the company on a dark winter's night."

Crabb said something that sounded like "Gah!" and turned abruptly and scurried away. At the end of the car he stopped, looked over his shoulder, and called out, "You know what's good for you, you stay away from those cars. Stay away!" Then he was gone into the swirling mist.

Quincannon finished his canvass of the remaining cars. Two others showed faint footprints and scratch marks on the walls and floor. In the second, his keen eye picked out something half-buried in drifted sand in one corner—a small but heavy piece of metal with a tiny ring soldered onto one end. After several turns in his hand, he identified it as a fisherman's lead sinker. He studied it for a few seconds longer, then pocketed it and left the car.

Before he quit the area, he climbed up to the top of the nearby line of dunes. Thick salt grass and stubby patches of gorse grew on the crests; the sand there was windswept to a tawny smoothness, without marks of any kind except for the imprint of Quincannon's boots as he moved along. From this vantage point, through intermittent tears in the curtain of fog, he could see the whitecapped ocean in the distance, the long beach and line of surf that edged it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The distant roar of breakers was muted by the wind's wail.

He walked for some ways, examining the surfaces. There was nothing up here to take his eye. No prints, no mashing of the grass or gorse to indicate passage. The steep slopes that fell away on both sides were likewise smoothly scoured, barren but for occasional bits of driftwood.

Wryly he thought: Whither thou, ghost?

The Meeker property was larger than it had seemed from a distance. In addition to the domino-styled home, there was a covered woodpile, a cistern, a small corral and lean-to built with its back to the wind, and on the other side of the cars, a dune-protected privy. As Quincannon drove the buggy up the lane, Barnaby Meeker came out to stand waiting on a railed and slanted walkway fronting the two center cars. A thin woman wearing a woolen cape soon joined him. Meeker gestured to the lean-to and corral, where an unhitched wagon and a roan horse were picketed and where there was room for the rented buggy and livery plug. Quincannon debouched there, decided he would deal with the animal's needs later, and went to join Meeker and the woman.

She was his wife, it developed, given name Lucretia. Her handshake was as firm as a man's, her eyes bird-bright. She might have been comely in her early years, but she seemed to have pinched and soured as she aged; her expression was that of someone who had eaten one too many sacks full of lemons. And she was not pleased to meet him.

"A detective, of all things," she said. "My husband can be foolishly impulsive at times."

"Now, Lucretia," Meeker said mildly.

"Don't deny it. What can a detective do to lay a ghost?"

"If it is a ghost, nothing. If it isn't, Mr. Quincannon will find out what's behind these . . . will-o'-the-wisps."

"Will-o'-the-wisps? On foggy nights with no moon?"

"Whatever they are, then."

"Your neighbor believes it's a genuine ghost," Quincannon said. "If you'll pardon the expression, the incidents have him badly spooked."

"You saw Mr. Crabb, did you?" Meeker asked.

"I did. Unfriendly gent. He warned me away from the abandoned cars."

"Good-for-nothing, if you ask me," Mrs. Meeker said.

"Indeed? What makes you think so?"

"He's a squatter, for one thing. And he has no profession, for another. No *licit* profession, I'll warrant."

"According to the counterman at the coffee saloon, Crabb told your son he was in construction work."

"Jared, you mean?" Her mouth turned even more lemony.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Another good-for-nothing."

"Now, Lucretia," Meeker said, not so mildly.

"Well? Do you deny it?"

"I do. He's yet to prove himself, that's all."

"Never will, I say."

The Meekers glared at each other. Mrs. Meeker was victorious in the game of staredown—as she would be most times they played it, Quincannon thought. Her husband averted his gaze and said to Quincannon, "Come inside. It's nippy out here."

The end walls where the two cars were joined had been removed to create one long room. It seemed too warm after the outside chill; a potbellied stove glowed cherry red in one corner. Quincannon accepted the offer of a cup of tea and Mrs. Meeker went to pour it from a pot resting atop the stove. He managed to maintain a poker face as he surveyed the surroundings. The car was a combination parlor, kitchen, and dining area, but it was like none other he had ever seen or hoped to see. The contents were an amazing hodgepodge of heavy Victorian furniture and decorations that included numerous framed photographs and daguerreotypes, gewgaws, gimcracks, and what was surely flotsam that had been collected from the beaches—pieces of driftwood, odd-shaped bottles, glass fisherman's floats, a section of draped netting like a moldy spiderweb. The effect was more that of a junkshop display than a comfortable habitation.

"Your son isn't home, I take it," Quincannon said. The tufted red-velvet chair he perched on was as uncomfortable as it looked.

"Thomas is a sergeant in the United States Army," Mrs. Meeker said. "Stationed at Fort Huachuca. We haven't seen him in two years, to my sorrow."

Meeker said, "Thomas is our eldest son," and added wryly, "my wife's favorite, as you may have surmised."

"And why shouldn't he be? He's the only one who has amounted or will amount to anything."

"Now, Lucretia," with bite in the words this time. "The way you malign Jared is annoying, to say the least. He may be a bit wild and irresponsible, but he—"

"A bit wild and irresponsible? A bit!" The teacup rattled in its saucer, spilling hot liquid that Quincannon barely managed to avoid, as she handed him the crockery. "He's a young scamp and you know it—worse today than when he was a kiting youngster. Up and quit the only decent job he ever held just last week, after less than a month's honest labor."

Quincannon cocked a questioning eyebrow at his employer.

"It was a clerk's job downtown, and poorly paid," Meeker said. "He's a bright lad, he'll find a more suitable position one day . . ."

"You won't live long enough to see the day and neither will I."

"That's enough, Lucretia."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh, go dance up a rope," she said, surprising Quincannon if not her husband.

Meeker performed his puffing-toad imitation and started to say something, but at that moment the door burst open and the wind blew in a young man swathed in a greatcoat, scarf, gloves, and stocking cap. His lean, clean-shaven face—weak-chinned and thin-lipped—was ruddy from the cold. Jared Meeker, in the flesh.

His parents might have been two sticks of furniture for all he had to say to them. It wasn't until he opened his coat and yanked off his cap, revealing a mop of ginger-colored hair, that he noticed Quincannon. "Well, a visitor. And a stranger at that."

"His name is John Quincannon," Mrs. Meeker said. "He's a detective."

The last word caused Jared's eyes to narrow. "A detective? What kind of detective? What's he doing here?"

"Your father hired him to investigate the supernatural. Of all things."

". . . Ah. The ghost, you mean?"

"Whatever it is we've seen these past two nights, yes," Meeker said.

Jared relaxed into an indolent posture as he shed his coat. Then he laughed, a thin barking sound like that of an adenoidal seal. "A detective to investigate a ghost. Hah! That's rich, that is."

Quincannon said, "I have had stranger cases, and brought them to a satisfactory conclusion. Are you a believer or a sceptic, lad?"

"I believe what I see with my own eyes. What about you?"

"I have an open mind on the subject," he lied.

"Well, it's a real ghost, all right. Likely of a man who died in one of the cars, or in a railway accident. Couldn't be anything else, no matter what anybody thinks. You may well see it for yourself, if you're planning to spend the night."

"I am."

"If it does reappear, you'll be a believer too."

"We'll see about that."

Jared grinned and loosed another bark. "A detective. Hah!"

Alone in the parlor, Quincannon smoked his stubby briar and waited for the hands on his stemwinder to point to 11:30. The Meekers had all retired to their respective bedrooms in the end cars some time earlier, at his insistence; he preferred to maintain a solitary vigil. He also preferred silence to desultory and pointless conversation. There were ominous rumblings in his digestive tract as well, the result of the bland chicken dish and boiled potatoes and carrots Mrs. Meeker had seen fit to serve for supper.

The car was no longer overheated, now that the fire in the stove had banked. Cooling, the stove metal made little pinging sounds that punctuated the snicking of wind-flung sand against the car's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

windows and sides. As 11:30 approached, he checked the loads in his Navy Colt. Not that he expected to need the weapon—the Carville ghost seemed to have no malevolent intention, and no one had ever succeeded in plugging a spook, in any case—but he had learned long ago to exercise caution in all situations.

It was time. He holstered the Navy, donned his greatcoat, cap, scarf, and gloves, and slipped out into the night.

Icy, fog-wet wind and blowing sand buffeted him as he came down off the walkway. The night was not quite black as tar but close to it; he could barely make out the shed and corral nearby. The distant jumble of abandoned cars was invisible except for brief rents in the wall of fog, and then discernible only as faint lumpish shapes among the dunes.

He slogged into the shelter of the lean-to. The two horses, both blanketed against the cold, stirred, and one nickered softly at his passage. He removed his dark lantern from beneath the seat of the rented buggy, lighted it, closed the shutter, and then went to the side wall and probed along it until he found a gap between boards. Another brief tear in the fog permitted him to fix the proper angle for viewing the cars. He dragged over two bales of hay, piled one atop the other, and perched on the makeshift seat. By bending forward slightly, his eyes were on a level with the gap. He settled down to wait.

He had learned patience in situations such as this by ruminating on matters of business and pleasure. Sabina occupied his mind for a considerable time. Then he sighed and shifted his thoughts to the other cases currently under investigation. The missing Devereaux heiress should be easy enough to locate; like as not she had gone off for an extended dalliance with one of her swains, since no ransom demand had been received by the family. Sabina needed no help from him in yaffling the pickpocket at the Chutes amusement park. The Wells Fargo robbery was more his type of case, and a challenging one since city bluecoats and rival detective agencies were also on the hunt for the two masked bandits who had escaped with twenty-five thousand in cash. He had to admit that he'd made little enough headway over the past two weeks, but the same was true of his competitors for the reward Wells Fargo was offering—

Light. A faint shimmery glow through the mist.

He strained forward, squinting closer to the gap. Gray-black for a few seconds, then the fog lifted somewhat and he spied the eerie radiance again, shifting about behind the windows in one of the cars. More than just a glow—an ectoplasmic shape, an unearthly face.

He snatched up the dark lantern, hopped off the hay bales, and stepped out around the corner of the lean-to. The thing continued to drift around inside the car, held stationary for a few seconds, moved again. Quincannon was moving himself by then, over into

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the shadow of the cistern. Beyond there, flattish sand fields stretched for thirty or forty rods on three sides; there was no cover anywhere on its expanse, no quick way to get to the cars, even by circling around, without crossing open space.

He waited for a thickening of the fog, then stepped out in a low crouch and ran toward the car. He was halfway there when the radiance vanished.

Immediately he veered to his right, toward the line of dunes behind the cars. But he couldn't generate any speed; in the wet darkness and loose sand he felt as if he were churning heavy-legged through a dream. There were no sounds except for the wind, the distant pound of surf, the rasp of his breathing.

It was two or three minutes before he reached the foot of the nearest dune. No sooner had he begun to plow upward along its steep side than the wraithlike human shape appeared suddenly at the crest and then bounded away in a rush of shimmery phosphorescence.

Quincannon shined the lantern in that direction, but the beam wasn't powerful enough to cut through the wall of fog. Cursing, he leaned forward and dug his free hand into the sand to help propel himself upward. Behind and below him, he heard a shout. A quick glance over his shoulder told him it had come from a man running across the sand field—Barnaby or Jared Meeker, alerted too late to be of any assistance.

He was a few feet from the crest when a wind-muffled report reached his ears. The ghost-shape twitched, seemed to bound forward another step or two, and then suddenly vanished. Two or three heartbeats later, it reappeared higher up, twisted, and was gone again.

Quincannon filled his right hand with his Navy Colt as he struggled, panting, to the dune top. When he straightened, he thought he saw another flash of radiance in the far distance. After that, there was nothing to see but fog and darkness.

He made his way forward, playing the lantern beam ahead of him. The grassy surface of this dune and the next in line showed no marks of passage. But down near the bottom on the opposite side, the light illuminated a faint, irregular line of tracks that the wind was already beginning to erase.

It illuminated something else below as he climbed atop the third dune—the dark figure of a man sprawled facedown in the sand.

Panting sounds reached his ears; a few moments later, Barnaby Meeker hove into view and staggered toward him. Quincannon didn't wait. He half-slid down the sand hill to the motionless figure at the bottom, anchored the lantern so that the beam shone full on the dark-clothed man, and turned him over. The staring eyes conveyed that he was beyond help. The gaping wound on his chest stated that he'd been shot.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Meeker came sliding down the hill, pulled up, and emitted a cry of anguish. "Jared! Oh my God, it's Jared!"

Quincannon cast his gaze back along the dunes. The line of irregular footprints led straight to where Jared Meeker lay. There were no others in the vicinity except for those made by Quincannon and Barnaby Meeker.

At dawn Quincannon helped his distraught employer hitch up his wagon. There were no telephones in Carville; Meeker would have to drive to the nearest one to summon the city police and coroner. Young Jared's body had been carried to his bedroom car, and Mrs. Meeker had held a vigil there most of the night. Despite her disparaging comments about her son, she had been inconsolable when she learned of his death. And she'd made no bones about blaming Quincannon for what had happened, screaming at him, "What kind of detective are you, allowing my poor boy to be murdered right before your eyes?"

For his part, Quincannon was in a dark humor. As unjust as Mrs. Meeker's tirade had been, Jared Meeker *had* been murdered more or less before his eyes. He couldn't have foreseen what would happen, of course, but the shooting was a potential blow to his reputation. If he failed to find out who was responsible, and why, the confounded newspapers would have a field day at his expense.

One thing was certain, and the apparent evidence to the contrary be damned: Jared Meeker had not been mortally wounded by a malevolent spirit from the Other Side. Spooks do not carry guns, nor can ectoplasm aim and fire one with deadly accuracy in foggy darkness.

When Meeker had gone on his way, Quincannon embarked on his first order of business—a talk with Artemus Crabb. Crabb had failed to put in an appearance at any time during last night's bizarre happenings, which might or might not have an innocent explanation. The fog was still present this morning, but the wind had died down and visibility was good. The dunes lay like a desert wasteland all around him as he trudged down the left fork to Crabb's car.

Knuckles on the rough-hewn door produced no response; neither did a brace of shouts. Not home at this hour? Quincannon used his fist on the door, and raised his call of Crabb's name to a tolerable bellow. This produced results. Crabb was home, and had apparently been asleep. He jerked the door open, wearing a pair of loose-fitting long johns, and glared at Quincannon out of sleep-puffed eyes.

"You," he said. "What the devil's the idea, waking me up this early?"

Quincannon said bluntly, "One of your neighbors was murdered last night."

"What? What's that? Who was murdered?"

"Jared Meeker. From all appearances, he was done in by the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Carville ghost."

Crabb recoiled a step, his eyes popping wide. "The hell you say. The . . . ghost? Last night?"

"On the prowl again, the same as before. You didn't see it?"

"Not me. Once was enough. I don't want nothing to do with spooks. I bolted my door, shuttered all the windows, and went to bed with a weapon close to hand."

"Heard nothing, either, I take it?"

"Just the wind. Where'd it happen?"

"On the dunes beyond the abandoned cars."

"I don't get it," Crabb said. "How can a damned ghost shoot a man?"

"A ghost can't. A man did."

"What man? Who'd want to kill the Meeker kid?"

Quincannon smiled wolfishly. "Who indeed?"

He left Crabb in the doorway and made his way past the jumble of abandoned cars, around behind the line of dunes where he'd last seen the white radiance. A careful search of the wind-smoothed sand along their backsides turned up nothing. Opposite where he had found Jared Meeker was another high-topped dune; he climbed it and inspected the sparse vegetation that grew along the crest.

Ah, just as he'd suspected. Some of the grass stalks had broken ends, and a patch of gorse was gouged and mashed flat. This was where the assassin had lain to fire the fatal shot—and a marksman he was, to have been so accurate on a night like the last.

Quincannon searched behind the dune. Here and there, in places sheltered from the wind, were footprints leading to and from the abandoned cars. Then he began to range outward in the opposite direction, zigzagging back and forth among the sand hills. Gulls wheeled overhead, shrieking, as he drew nearer to the beach. The Pacific was calmer this morning, the waves breaking more quietly over the white sand.

For more than an hour he continued his hunt. He found nothing among the dunes. The long inner sweep of the beach was littered with all manner of flotsam cast up during storms and high winds—shells, bottles, tins, driftwood large and small, birds and sea creatures alive and dead. Last night's wind had been blowing from the southeast; he ranged farther to the north, his sharp eyes scanning left and right.

Some two hundred rods from where he had emerged onto the beach, he found what he was looking for. Or rather, the wreckage of what he was looking for, caught and tangled around the bare limb of a tree branch.

He extricated it carefully, examined it, and tucked it inside his coat. After which, whistling a temperance tune off-key, he retraced his path along the beach, through the dunes, and back to the Meekers' home.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The car that had been Jared Meeker's bedroom was the northernmost of the four. The curtains had been drawn over the windows; he went to the door, knocked discreetly, received no response. Mrs. Meeker, as he'd hoped, had given up her vigil and gone to one of the other cars. He tried the latch, found it unlocked, stepped inside, and shut the door behind him.

The dead man lay on his bed, covered by a blanket provided by his mother. The rest of the room contained a stove, a few pieces of mismatched furniture, a steamer trunk, a framed Wild West-show poster depicting a cowboy riding a wildly bucking bronco, and little else. Quincannon searched the dresser drawers first, then the steamer trunk. Several items of interest were tucked inside the latter: hand tools, a ball of twine, a jar of oil-based paint, a board with four ten-penny nails driven through it, and two lead sinkers that matched in size and shape the one he'd found yesterday in the abandoned car.

He left the items where they lay and was closing the trunk's lid when the door opened and Mrs. Meeker entered. She emitted a startled gasp when she saw him. "Mr. Quincannon! How dare you come in here without permission!"

"My apologies. But it was necessary."

"Necessary? Prowling through my dead son's possessions?"

"To the conclusion of my investigation."

"... Are you saying you know who murdered Jared?"

Before he could respond, a hailing shout came from outside: Barnaby Meeker had returned. And not alone. With him were the city coroner in a morgue wagon, and a plainclothes homicide detective named Hiram Dooley in a police hack driven by a bluecoat.

Dooley was middle-aged, portly, sported a thick brushy moustache, and had a complexion the exact hue of cooked beets. Stretched across his bulging middle was a gold watch chain adorned with an elk's tooth the size of a golf ball. His first words to Quincannon were, "I've heard of you, laddybuck. You and that female partner of yours."

"Only in the most glowing terms, no doubt."

"Hah. Just because you've counted yourselves lucky on a few cases doesn't mark you high in my book. I don't like flycops."

And I don't like pompous, empty-headed civil servants, Quincannon thought, but he only smiled and said, "Perhaps I'll count myself lucky, as you put it, on this case as well."

"Yeah? We'll see about that."

That we will, Inspector. And sooner than you think.

Meeker had already given Dooley an account of the previous night's events, but the homicide dick demanded another from Quincannon. He scoffed at what he called "this spook hokum" and seemed sceptical, if not openly suspicious, of Quincannon's role in the matter. Quincannon bore his browbeating with good-natured

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

equanimity. He could have told Dooley then and there what he had deduced, but the man's manner irritated him and he took a certain amount of pleasure in watching him blunder and bluster about Jared's bedroom and the scene of the murder, overlooking clues and asking the wrong questions. While the two policemen were examining the abandoned cars, Quincannon took Barnaby Meeker aside and asked him a pair of seemingly innocuous questions. The answers he received were the ones he had expected.

As Dooley and the bluecoat emerged, Artemus Crabb came striding over from the direction of his car. Crabb seemed more at ease this time, his face reflecting curiosity rather than hostility or concern. He barely glanced at Quincannon, his attention focused on the lawdogs.

"And who would you be?" Dooley demanded.

"Crabb's my name. I live over yonder."

Dooley introduced himself. "I been told you didn't see anything of what happened out here last night."

"That's right, I didn't. Seen the spook lights the night before and once is enough for me. I spent last night locked up inside my car."

"No, you didn't," Quincannon said.

"What's that?"

"You spent part of the night lying in wait on one of the dunes, with a cocked revolver in your hand."

"What the devil would I do that for?"

"To lay the Carville ghost once and for all."

All eyes were on Quincannon now, Crabb glaring with feigned indignation, Dooley and Meeker showing their surprise. Quincannon favored them with the smile he reserved for moments such as these. It was time for him to take center stage, to reveal the deductive prowess that made him, in his estimation, the finest detective west of the Mississippi—a role he relished above all others.

Meeker said, "What are you saying, Mr. Quincannon? That Crabb murdered my son?"

"With malice aforethought."

"That's a damn lie!" Crabb snapped. "Spook stuff scares the bejesus out of me. Ask Meeker, ask that old coot in the coffee saloon—they'll tell you."

"Spook stuff that you fear might be authentic, yes. But by the time you crouched in wait last night, you knew the truth about the Carville ghost."

"What truth?" Dooley demanded.

"That it was all a sham designed to separate Mr. Crabb from his cache of loot."

"Loot? *What* loot?"

"The twenty-five thousand dollars he and his accomplice stole from Wells Fargo Express two weeks ago."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dooley gawped at him. Crabb shouted, "You're crazy! You can't pin that on me. You can't prove anything against me."

"I can prove that you murdered Jared Meeker," Quincannon said, "by your own testimony. When I told you this morning that he'd been killed, you said, 'How can a damned ghost shoot a man?' But I didn't say *how* he'd been killed. How did you know he'd been shot unless you pulled the trigger yourself?"

"I just, ah, assumed it . . ."

"Bosh. You had no reason to assume such a fact." Quincannon turned his attention to Dooley. "Jared Meeker was shot with a large-bore handgun, one with a considerable range—the very type Crabb carries. A search of his premises should provide additional evidence. Though not the loot from the robbery, or else Jared would have found it. It's hidden elsewhere, likely buried under or near one of those abandoned cars—"

"Hold on, Quincannon," Dooley said. "You telling us Jared Meeker knew Crabb was one of the bandits?"

"He did—because he was the other one, Crabb's accomplice."

Meeker emitted a wounded sound, puffed up, and stabbed the sand with his blackthorn stick. "That can't be true!"

"But I'm afraid it is," Quincannon said. "You told me yourself just now that the only job Jared held in his young life was that of a clerk in a shoe emporium on Kearney Street downtown—the same street and the very same block on which the Wells Fargo Express office is located, and a perfect position to observe the days and times large sums of cash were delivered. He fell in somehow with Crabb, and together they planned and executed the robbery. Afterward they separated, Crabb evidently keeping the loot with him. The plan then called for Crabb to take up residence here in Carville, a place known to have been used before as a temporary hideout by criminals, until the hunt for the stolen money grew cold.

"My guess is that Jared grew impatient for his share of the spoils and Crabb refused to give it to him or to reveal where he'd hidden it. His first action would have been to search Crabb's car when Crabb was away on one of his infrequent outings. When he didn't find the loot, he embarked on a more devious—and foolish—course."

Dooley asked, "Why didn't he just throw down on Crabb and demand his share?"

"The lad wasn't made that way. He was a sly schemer and likely something of a coward, afraid of a direct confrontation with his partner in crime. I'm sorry, Mr. Meeker, but the evidence supports this conclusion."

Meeker said nothing. He appeared to be slowly deflating.

Quincannon went on, "At some point during their relationship, Crabb revealed to Jared his fear of the supernatural. This was the core of the lad's too-clever plan. He would frighten Crabb enough to force him to leave Carville after first digging up and dividing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the loot. But he was careless enough to say or do something to alert Crabb to the game he was playing. That, and the probable fact that Crabb wanted the entire booty for himself, cost Jared his life."

"So he was responsible for the spook business," Dooley said.

"More than just responsible. He *was* the Carville ghost."

"And just how did he manage that?"

"A remark Mrs. Meeker made yesterday alerted me to the method. She said that he was 'a kiting youngster.' At the time I took that to mean flighty, the runabout sort, but she meant it literally. His passion as a boy, as Mr. Meeker confirmed to me a few minutes ago, was flying kites."

"What does that have to do with—"

Dooley abruptly stopped speaking. For just then Quincannon had removed from beneath his coat the wreckage he'd found earlier on the beach.

"This is the Carville ghost, or what's left of it," he said. "A simple kite made of heavy canvas tacked onto a wooden frame, roughly fashioned in the shape of a man and coated with an oil-based paint mixed with phosphorous—all the tools for the making of which you'll find in Jared's steamer trunk. His game went like this: First he told Crabb that he'd seen spook lights among the abandoned cars and to watch for them himself. Then, past midnight, he slipped out, went to one of the cars, flashed the kite about to create the illusion of an otherworldly glow, used a tool made of a piece of wood and several nails—which you'll also find in his trunk—to make clawlike scratches on the walls and floors, and then fled with the kite before Crabb or anyone else could catch him."

Meeker asked dully, "How could he run across the tops of the dunes without leaving tracks?"

"He didn't run across the tops, he ran along below and behind the dunes with the string played out just far enough to lift the kite above the crests. To hold it at that height, he used these—" Quincannon held out one of the lead sinkers he'd found—"to weight it down so he could control it in the wind. On dark, foggy nights, seen from a distance and manipulated by an expert kite flier, the kite gave every appearance of a ghostly figure bounding across the sand hills. And when he wanted it to disappear, he merely yanked it down out of sight, drew it in, and hid it under his coat. That was what he was about to do when Crabb shot him. When the bullet struck him, the string loosed from his hand and the kite was carried off by the wind. I saw flashes of phosphorescence, higher up, before it disappeared altogether. This morning I found the remains on the beach."

Dooley said grudgingly, "By godfrey, it all makes sense. You, Crabb, what do you have to say for yourself now?"

"Just this." And before anyone could move, Crabb's hand snaked under his coat and came out holding the large-bore Bisley Colt. "I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

didn't let that featherbrain kid get his hands on this money and I ain't about to let you do it either. The lot of you, move on over to that car of mine."

Nobody moved except Crabb. He backed up a step. "I mean it," he said. "Be locked up until I'm clear or take a bullet where you stand. One killing or several, it don't make any difference to me."

He backed up another step. Unfortunately for him, the direction he took brought him just close enough for Quincannon to swat him with the wrecked kite. The blow pitched him off-balance; before he could bring his weapon to bear again, Quincannon thumped him once on the temple and once on the point of the jaw. Crabb obligingly dropped the revolver and lay down quiet in the sand.

Quincannon massaged his bruised knuckles. "And what do you think of flycops now, laddybuck?" he asked Dooley. "Do you mark John Quincannon higher in that book of yours than before?"

Dooley, bending down to Crabb with a pair of handcuffs, muttered something that Quincannon—perhaps fortunately—failed to catch.

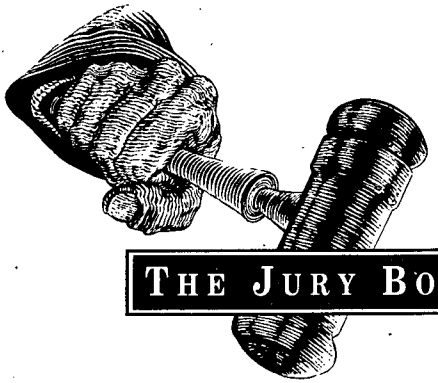
Artemus Crabb, with a certain amount of persuasion from Dooley and the bluecoat, confessed to the robbery and the murder of Jared Meeker—the details of both being for the most part as Quincannon had surmised. The Wells Fargo money turned out to be buried beneath one of the abandoned cars; the full amount was there, not a penny having been spent.

Crabb and the loot were carted away in the police hack, and young Jared's remains in the morgue wagon. The Meekers followed the coroner in their buggy. Neither had anything to say to Quincannon, though Mrs. Meeker fixed him with a baleful glare as they pulled out. He supposed that the one thousand dollars Barnaby Meeker had promised him would not be paid; but even if it was offered, he would be hard-pressed to accept it under the circumstances. He felt sympathy for the Meekers. The loss of a wastrel son was no less painful than the loss of a saintly one.

Besides, he thought as he clattered the rented buggy after the others, he would be well recompensed for his twenty-four hours in Carville-by-the-Sea and his usual brilliant detective work. The reward offered by Wells Fargo for the return of the stolen funds was ten percent of the total—the not inconsiderable sum of $2,500 to fatten the coffers of Carpenter and Quincannon, Professional Detective Services.

A smile creased his whiskers. A reward of that magnitude might well induce Sabina to change her mind about having dinner with him at Marchand's French Restaurant. It might even induce her to change her mind about another type of celebratory entertainment. Women were mutable creatures, after all, and John Quincannon was nothing if not persistent. One of these evenings he might yet be gifted with the only reward he coveted more than the financial....●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

While lawyers don't dominate crime fiction as much as they do politics, they continue to be well represented among mystery writers and fictional sleuths. The first seven titles considered below all have lawyer protagonists, and all but two are written by lawyers.

**** Lisa Scottoline: *Daddy's Girl,* HarperCollins, $25.95. Natalie Greco, a young University of Pennsylvania law professor, agrees to deliver a lecture at a minimum-security prison, where a riot breaks out and she becomes the recipient of a dying guard's cryptic message to his wife. The neatly constructed mystery plot is a vehicle for Scottoline's ever-present humor and her recurring themes of law versus justice and family dynamics, the latter illustrated by Nat's relationship with her domineering father, her "man's woman" mother, and the insensitive and juvenile brothers with whom her clueless boyfriend gets along all too well.

*** Margaret Maron: *Hard Row,* Warner, $24.99. Speaking of family relationships, no series depicts a larger extended family tree or concentrates more on domestic concerns than the saga of North Carolina's Judge Deborah Knott. The plot concerns the plight of undocumented migrant workers and the murder of an unidentified man found one body part at a time in the rural countryside. Defendants met in brief visits to the judge's courtroom include two men tried jointly for assaulting each other in a barroom brawl and an able-bodied driver whose car was towed for parking in a handicapped space. Appropriate chapter epigraphs are drawn from the 1890 book *Profitable Farming in the Southern States.* A solid entry in a distinguished series.

*** Richard North Patterson: *Exile,* Holt, $26. San Francisco lawyer David Wolfe, whose fiancée is the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, defends an old girlfriend, Palestinian activist Hana Arif, **(continued on p. 238)**

©2007 by Jon L. Breen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Allen Davis

PICKPOCKET

by Marcia Muller

Sabina Carpenter put on her straw picture hat and contemplated the hatpins in the velvet cushion on her bureau. After a moment she selected a Charles Horner design of silver and coral and skewered the hat to her upswept dark hair. The hatpin, a gift on her last birthday, was one of two she owned by the famed British designer. The other, a butterfly with an onyx body and diamond-chip wings, was a gift from her late husband and much too ornate—to say nothing of valuable—to wear during the day.

Momentarily she recalled Stephen's face: thin, with prominent cheekbones and chin. Brilliant blue eyes below dark brown hair. A face that could radiate tenderness—and danger. Like herself, a Pinkerton detective in Denver, he had been working on a land-fraud case when he was shot to death in a raid. It troubled Sabina that over the past few years his features had become less distinct in her memory, as had those of her deceased parents, but she assumed that was human nature. One's memories blur; one goes on.

She scrutinized her reflection in the mirror and concluded that she looked more like a respectable young matron than a private detective setting out to trap a pickpocket. Satisfied, she left her

©2007 by Marcia Muller

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

second-story Russian Hill flat, passed through the iron picket fence, and entered a hansom cab that she had earlier engaged. It took her down Van Ness Avenue and south on Haight Street.

The journey was a lengthy one, passing through sparsely settled areas of the city, and it gave Sabina time to reflect upon the job ahead. Charles Ackerman, owner of the Haight Street Chutes amusement park and an attorney for the Southern Pacific and the Market Street and Sutter Street Railroads, had come to the offices of Carpenter and Quincannon, Professional Detective Services, the previous morning. Sabina's partner, John Quincannon, had been out of sorts because she had just refused his invitation to dinner at Marchand's French restaurant. Sabina, a practical woman, refused many of John's frequent invitations. Mixing business with pleasure was a dangerous proposition; it could imperil their partnership, an arrangement she was very happy with as it stood. . . .

And yet, she did not find John unattractive. Quite the opposite—

Sternly, Sabina turned her thoughts to the business at hand.

Charles Ackerman had a problem at his newly opened amusement park, on Haight Street near the southern edge of Golden Gate Park. Patrons had complained that a pickpocket was operating in the park, yet neither his employees nor the police had yet to observe any of the more notorious dips and cutpurses who worked the San Francisco streets. A clever woman, Ackerman said with a nod at Sabina, might be able to succeed where they had failed. John bristled at being excluded, then lapsed into a grumpy silence. Sabina and Ackerman concluded the conversation and agreed she would come to the park the next morning, after she had finished with another bit of pressing business.

The hack pulled to the curb between Cole and Clayton Streets. Sabina paid the driver and alighted, then turned toward the park. Its most prominent feature was a 300-foot-long Shoot-the-Chutes: a double-trestled track that rose seventy feet into the air. Passengers would ascend to a room at the top of the slides, where they would board boats for a swift descent to an artificial lake at the bottom. Sabina had heard that the ride was quite thrilling—or frightening, according to the person's perspective. She herself would enjoy trying it.

Marcia Muller is considered a pioneer in the mystery world for her creation of Sharon McCone, the first modern female P.I. The McCone series now has more than two dozen entries. (See *The Ever-Running Man*, Warner Books, 2007). For this story, however, she has borrowed a character from her husband, Bill Pronzini, to create a tale that partners his (on p. 4).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In addition to the water slide, the park contained a scenic railway, a merry-go-round, various carnival-like establishments, and a refreshment stand. Ackerman had told Sabina she would find his manager, Lester Sweeney, in the office beyond the ticket booth. She crossed the street, holding up her slim flowered skirt so the hem wouldn't get dusty, and asked at the booth for Mr. Sweeney. The man collecting admissions motioned her inside and through a door behind him.

Sweeney was at a desk that seemed too large for the cramped space, adding a column of figures. He was a big man, possibly in his late forties, with thinning red hair and a complexion that spoke of a fondness for strong drink. When he looked up at Sabina, his eyes, reddened and surrounded by pouched flesh, gleamed in appreciation. Quickly she presented her card, and the gleam faded.

"Please sit down, Mrs. Carpenter," he said. "Mr. Ackerman told me you'd be coming this morning."

"Thank you." Sabina sat on the single wooden chair sandwiched between the desk and the wall. "What can you tell me about these pickpocketing incidents?"

"They have occurred over the past two weeks, at different times of day. Eight in all. Word is spreading. We're bound to lose customers."

"You spoke with the victims?"

"Yes, and there may have been others who didn't report the incidents."

"Was there anything in common that was reported?"

Sweeney frowned, thinking. The frown had an alarming effect on his face, making it look like something that had softened and spread after being left out in the rain. In a moment he shook his head. "Nothing that I can recall."

"Do you have the victims' names and addresses?"

"Somewhere here." He began to shuffle through the many papers on his desk.

Sabina held up a hand and stood. "I'll return to collect the list later. In the meantime, I trust I may have full access to the park?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Carpenter."

Several hours later Sabina, who was familiar with most of San Francisco's dips and cutpurses, had ascertained that none of them was working the Chutes. Notably absent were Fanny Spigott, dubbed "Queen of the Pickpockets," and her husband Joe, "King of the Pickpockets," who recently had plotted—unsuccessfully—to steal the two-thousand-pound statue of *Venus de Milo* from the Louvre Museum in Paris. Also among the absent were Lil Hamlin ("Fainting Lil"), whose ploy was to pass out in the arms of her victims; Jane O'Leary ("Weeping Jane"), who lured her marks in by enlisting them in the hunt for her missing six-year-old, then relieved them of their valuables while hugging them when the precocious and well-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

trained child was "found"; "Fingers" McCoy, who claimed to have the fastest reach in town; and Lovely Lena, true name unknown, a blonde so captivating that it was said she blinded her victims.

While searching for her pickpocket, Sabina had toured the park on the scenic railway, eaten an ice cream, ridden the merry-go-round, and taken a boat ride down the Chutes—which was indeed thrilling. So thrilling that she rewarded her bravery with a German sausage on a sourdough roll. It was early afternoon and she was leaving Lester Sweeney's office with the list of the pickpocket's victims when she saw an unaccompanied woman intensely watching the crowd around the merry-go-round. The woman moved foward, next to a man in a straw bowler, but when he turned and nodded to her she stepped a few paces away.

Sabina moved closer.

The woman had light-brown hair, upswept under a wide-brimmed straw picture hat similar to Sabina's. She was slender, outfitted in a white shirtwaist and cornflower blue skirt. The hat shaded her features, and the only distinctive thing about her attire was the pin that held the hat to her head. Sabina—a connoisseur of hatpins—recognized it as a Charles Horner of blue glass overlaid with a gold pattern.

The woman must have felt Sabina's gaze. She looked around, and Sabina saw she had blue eyes and rather plain features, except for a small white scar on her chin. Her gaze slid over Sabina, focused on a man to her right, but moved away when he reached down to pick up a fretting child. After a moment the woman turned and walked slowly toward the exit.

A pickpocket, for certain; Sabina had seen how they operated many times. She followed, keeping her eyes on the distinctive hatpin.

Fortunately there was a row of hansom cabs waiting outside the gates of the park. The woman with the distinctive hatpin claimed the first of these, and Sabina took another, asking the driver to follow the other hack. He regarded her curiously, no doubt unused to gentlewomen making such requests; but the new century was rapidly approaching, and with it what the press had dubbed the New Woman. Very often these days the female sex did not think or act as they once had.

The brown-haired woman's cab led them north on Haight and finally to Market Street, the city's main artery. There she disembarked near the Palace Hotel—as did Sabina—and crossed Market to Montgomery. It was five o'clock, and businessmen of all kinds were pouring out of their downtown offices to travel the Cocktail Route, as the Gay Nineties' young blades termed it.

From the Reception Saloon on Sutter Street to Haquette's Palace of Art on Post Street to the Palace Hotel Bar, the influential men of San Francisco trekked daily, partaking of fine liquor and lavish free banquet spreads. Women—at least respectable

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ones—were not admitted to these establishments, but Sabina had ample knowledge of them from John's tales of the days when he was a drinking man. He had been an operative with the U.S. Secret Service, until the accidental death by his hand of a pregnant woman turned him into a drunkard; those were the days before he met Sabina and embarked on a new, sober life. . . .

Once again she forced her thoughts away from John Quincannon.

The woman she had followed from the amusement park was now well into the crowd on Montgomery Street—known as the Ambrosial Path to cocktail-hour revelers. Street characters and vendors, beggars and ad-carriers for the various saloons' free lunches, temperance speakers and the Salvation Army band—all mingled with well-dressed bankers and attorneys, politicians and physicians. Sabina made her way through the throng, keeping her eye on the woman's hat, brushing aside the opportunings of a match peddler. The woman moved along unhurriedly and after two blocks turned left and walked over to Kearney.

There the street scene was even livelier: palm readers, shooting galleries, and auction houses had their quarters there. Ever present were the shouting vendors and pitchmen of all sorts; fakirs and touters of Marxism; snake charmers and speech makers of all persuasions. It seemed every type of individual in the world had come to Kearney Street for the start of the evening. Sabina kept her eyes on the woman as she moved at a leisurely pace, stopping to finger a bolt of Indian fabric and then to listen to a speaker extol the virtues of phrenology. She moved deeper into the crowd, and Sabina momentarily lost her; seconds later she heard a faint cry and pushed her way forward.

A gent in a frock coat was bent over, his silk hat having fallen to the sidewalk. As he straightened, his face frozen in a grimace of pain, he reached inside his coat. Sudden anger replaced pain and he shouted, "Stop, thief!"

But no one was fleeing. The crowd murmured, heads swiveling, faces curious and alarmed. The man again shouted, "My watch! I've been robbed!"

Sabina moved forward. "What happened?"

The man stared at her, open-mouthed.

She hurriedly removed one of her cards from her reticule and gave it to him. "I am investigating a series of thefts. Please tell me what happened."

He examined the card. "Will you find the person who took my watch? It is very old and rare—"

"Was it you who cried out earlier?"

"Yes. I suffered a sharp pain in my side. Here." He indicated his lower left ribcage. "I have had such discomfort before, and I've just come from the Bank Exchange, where, I'm afraid, I consumed an overlarge quantity of oysters on the half shell. I suppose the thief

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

took advantage of my distress."

"Did you not notice anyone close to you? A woman, perhaps?"

The gent shook his head. "I saw no one."

Sabina turned to the ring of people surrounding them, asked the same question of them, and received the same answer.

The woman she'd followed from the amusement park had found her mark, struck, and swiftly vanished.

It was near on to seven o'clock, an inconvenient time to go calling, but over the course of her years as a Pinkerton operative and a self-employed detective, Sabina had become accustomed to calling on people at inconvenient times.

At her flat on Russian Hill, she changed into a heavy black skirt and shirtwaist and, in deference to the foggy San Francisco evening, a long cape. Once again she left in a hansom cab, one she'd hired to wait for her at her stops along the way. She had studied the list of names of the pickpocket's victims that Lester Sweeney had given her, and mapped out a convenient and easy route.

Her first destination was the home of Mr. William Buchanan on Green Street near Van Ness Avenue. Mr. Buchanan was not at home, the maid who answered the door told her. He and Mrs. Buchanan had gone to their country house on the Peninsula for two weeks.

In the cab again, Sabina crossed Mr. Buchanan's name off the list, and instructed the driver to take her to an address on Webster Street in the Western Addition.

The house there was large and elegant, and Mr. John Greenway resembled many of the well-attired gentlemen Sabina had earlier seen parading on the Cocktail Route. He greeted her cordially, taking her into the front parlor and introducing her to his attractive wife, who looked to be expecting a child.

"A note from Mr. Sweeney at the Chutes was delivered this afternoon," he told Sabina. "It said you wish to speak with me concerning the theft of my diamond stickpin. I hope I can help you."

"As do I. What were the circumstances of the theft?"

Greenway glanced at his auburn-haired wife, who smiled encouragingly. "We had ridden the water slide and stopped at the refreshment stand for a glass of lemonade," he said. "The ride had made me feel unwell, so we decided to come home. There was a large crowd watching a juggler near the gates, and we were separated in it. I felt a sharp pain in my side—the result of the ride, I suppose—and momentarily became disoriented. When I recovered and my wife rejoined me, she saw that my stickpin was missing."

Men in distress, Sabina thought. A clever pickpocket noting this and taking advantage of their momentary confusion.

She thanked the Greenways and took her leave.

No one came to the door at either of the next two victims' resi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dences, but at a small Eastlake-style Victorian near Lafayette Square, Sabina was greeted by the plump young daughter of Mr. George Anderson. Her parents, the daughter said, were at the Orpheum, a vaudeville house on O'Farrell Street. Could she reveal anything about the distressing incident at the amusement park? Sabina asked. Certainly; the daughter had witnessed it.

In the small front parlor, Ellen Anderson rang for the housekeeper and ordered tea. It came quickly, accompanied by a plate of ginger cookies. Sabina took one as Miss Anderson poured and prattled on about her excitement about meeting a lady detective. Then she proceeded with her questioning.

"You were with your father at the amusement park when his purse was stolen?"

"My mother, my brother, and I."

"Tell me what you saw, please."

"We were near the merry-go-round. It was very crowded, children waiting to board and parents watching their children on the ride. Allen, my brother, was trying to persuade me to ride with him. He's only ten years old, so a merry-go-round is a thrill for him, but I'm sixteen, and it seems so very childish. . . ."

"Did you ride anyway?"

"No. But Allen did. We were watching him when suddenly my father groaned. He took hold of his side, slued around, and staggered a few paces. Mother and I caught him before he could fall. When we'd righted him, he found all his money was gone."

"What caused this sudden pain?

"A gastric distress, apparently."

"Does your father normally suffer from digestive problems?"

"No, but earlier we'd had hot sausages at the refreshment stand. We assumed they were what affected him and then a thief had taken advantage of the moment."

Every thief has his or her own method, Sabina thought, and evidently this one's was to seek out people who had fallen ill and were therefore vulnerable.

"Did your father talk about the incident afterwards?"

Ellen Anderson shook her dark-curled head. "He seemed ashamed of being robbed. In fact, Mother had to insist he report the theft to the park manager."

"Did his distress continue afterwards?"

"I don't think so, but he's never been one to talk about his ailments."

Two more fruitless stops left her with a final name on the list: Henry Holbrooke, on South Park. The oval-shaped park, an exact copy of London's Berkeley Square, had once been home to the reigning society of San Francisco, but now its grandeur, and that of neighboring Rincon Hill, was fading. Most of the powerful mil-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lionaires and their families who had resided there had moved to more fashionable venues such as Nob Hill, and many of the elegant homes looked somewhat shopworn. Henry Holbrooke's was one of the latter, its paint peeling and small front garden unkempt: a grand old lady slipping into genteel poverty.

A light was burning behind heavy velvet curtains in a bay window, but when Sabina knocked, no one answered. She knocked again, and after a moment the door opened. The inner hallway was so dark that she could scarcely make out the person standing there. Then she saw it was a woman dressed entirely in black. She said, "Mrs. Holbrooke?"

"Yes." The woman's voice cracked, as if rusty from disuse.

Sabina gave her name and explained her mission. The woman made no move to take the card she extended.

"May I speak with your husband?" Sabina asked.

"My husband is dead."

". . . My condolences. May I ask when he passed on?"

"Two weeks ago."

That would have been a week after he was robbed of his money belt at the Chutes.

"May I come in?" Sabina asked.

"I'd rather you didn't. I've been . . . tearful. I don't wish for anyone to see me after I've been weeping."

"I understand. What was the cause of your husband's death?"

"An infection and internal bleeding."

"Had he been ill long?"

"He had never been ill. Not a day in his life."

"What did his physician say?"

The widow laughed harshly. "We couldn't afford a physician, not after his money belt was stolen. He died at home, in my arms, and the coroner came and took him away. I had to sell my jewelry—what was left of it—so he could have a decent burial."

"I'm sorry. Why did he have so much money on his person during an afternoon at the amusement park?"

"My husband never went anywhere without that belt. He was afraid to leave it at home. This neighborhood is not what it once was."

Sabina glanced at the neighboring homes in their fading glory. Henry Holbrooke would have been better advised to keep his money in a bank.

"Did the coroner tell you what might have caused your husband's infection?" she asked.

Mrs. Holbrooke leaned heavily on the doorjamb; like South Park, she was slowly deteriorating. "No. Only that it resulted in internal bleeding." The woman reached out and placed a hand on Sabina's arm. "If you apprehend the thief, will you recover my husband's money?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Most likely it had already been spent, but Sabina said, "Perhaps."

"Will you return it to me? I'd like to buy him a good gravemarker."

"Of course."

If the money had indeed been spent, Sabina resolved that Carpenter & Quincannon would supply the gravemarker, out of the handsome fee Charles Ackerman would pay them—whether John liked it or not.

Sabina returned to the hansom, but asked the driver to wait. A pickpocket, she thought, rarely works the same territory in a single day. The woman she had followed was unlikely to return to the Chutes in the near future; she'd seen Sabina eyeing her suspiciously. The Ambrosial Path would be similarly off limits, since she'd had success there and word would by now have spread among the habitués of the area. Where else would a pickpocket who preyed on the infirm go to ply her trade?

After a moment, Sabina said to the hack driver, "Take me to Market and Fourth Streets, please."

The open field at Market and Fourth was brightly lit by lanterns and torchlights, and dotted with tents and wagons. Music filled the air from many sources, each competing with the other; barkers shouted, and a group of Negro minstrels sang "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Sabina stood at the field's perimeter, surveying the medicine show.

From the wagons men hawked well-known remedies: Tiger Balm, Snake Dust, aconite, Pain Begone, Miracle Wort. Others offered services on the spot: painless dentistry, spinal realignment, Chinese herbs brewed to the taste, head massages. Sabina, who had attended the medicine show with John after moving to San Francisco—a must, he'd said, for new residents—recognized several of the participants: Pawnee Bill, The Great Ferndon, Doctor Jekyll, Herman the Healer, Rodney Strongheart.

The din rose as a shill for Doctor Wallmann's Nerve and Brain Salts stood in his red coach—six black horses stamping and snorting—to extol the product. Sabina smiled; John had frequently posed as a drummer for Doctor Wallmann's, and said the salts were nothing more than table salt mixed with borax.

Someone nearby shouted, "The show is on!" A top-hatted magician and his sultry, robed assistant emerged from a striped tent; another show—Indians in dancing regalia—began to compete, the thump of tom-toms drowning out a banjo player. The entertainment quickly ended when the selling began.

Sabina continued to scan the scene before her. The crowd was mostly men; the few women she judged to be of the lower classes by their worn clothing and roughened faces and hands. Not a lady—fancy or fine—in the lot. And no one with a picture hat and unusual pin. However, the woman she sought could have changed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her clothing as she herself had. Sabina moved into the crowd.

A snake charmer's flute caught her attention, and she watched the pathetic defanged creature rise haltingly from its shabby basket. She turned away, spied under the wide brim of a battered straw hat. The woman had dark eyes and gray hair—not the person she was looking for.

On a platform at the back of a wagon, a dancer was performing, draped in filmy veils. Unfortunately, the veils slipped and fell to the ground, revealing her scarlet long johns. A man with an ostrich-feather-bedecked hat began expounding upon the virtues of Sydney's Cough Syrup, only to fall into a fit of coughing. Sabina glanced at the face under the brim of an old-fashioned bonnet and saw the woman was elderly.

Wide-brimmed hat with bedraggled feathers: a badly scarred young woman whose plight made Sabina flinch. Toque draped in fading tulle: red hair and freckles. Another bonnet: white hair and fine wrinkles.

As Sabina was approaching a model of France's infamous guillotine, a cry rang out. She soon saw that the ostrich feathers of the spokesman for Sydney's Cough Syrup had caught fire from one of the torches. A nearby man rushed to throw the hat to the ground and stomp the flames out.

A freak show was starting. The barker urged Sabina to enter the tent and view the dwarf and deformed baby in a bottle. She declined—not at all respectfully.

Extravagant hat with many layers of feathers and a stuffed bird's head protruding at the front: long blond hair.

Temperance speakers, exhibiting jars containing diseased kidneys. No, thank you.

Another bird hat. What *was* the fascination with wearing dead avian creatures on one's head? The woman beneath the brim looked not much healthier than the bird that had died to grace her headpiece.

A barker tried to entice Sabina into a wax display of a hanging. No to that also.

Worn blue velvet wide-brimmed hat, secured by . . . a Charles Horner hatpin, blue glass overlaid with a gold pattern. Ah!

The woman moved through the crowd, head swiveling from side to side.

Sabina waited until her quarry was several yards ahead of her, then followed.

The woman pretended interest in a miraculous electrified belt filled with cayenne pepper whose purveyor claimed would cure any debilitation. She stopped to listen to the Negro minstrels and clapped appreciatively when their music ended. Considered a temperance pamphlet, but shook her head. Accepted a flier from the seller of White's Female Complaint Cure.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

All the time, as Sabina covertly watched her, the pickpocket's head continued to move from side to side—looking for someone in distress. Someone whom she could rob.

Sabina seldom had difficulty controlling her temper. True, it rose swiftly, but just as swiftly it turned from hot outrage to cold resolve. She, too, began looking for someone in distress. Someone whom she could save from the woman's thievery.

Before long, she saw him, nearly ten yards away: humped over, leaning on a cane, walking haltingly. She poised to move in, but the woman, who obviously had seen him too, surprised her by turning the other way.

Another old man: limping, forehead shiny with perspiration in spite of the chill temperature.

The woman passed him by.

Had Sabina been wrong about the pickpocket's method? No, this dip was clever. She was waiting for the ideal victim.

More wandering. More pretending interest in the shows and wares. No indication that the pickpocket had spied her.

In front of the bright red coach belonging to the purveyor of Doctor Wallmann's Nerve and Brain Salts, the woman stopped. She spoke to the vendor, examined the bottle, then shook her head. A crowd had pressed in behind her. She stretched her arms up behind her head, then dropped them and angled through the people.

And in that moment Sabina knew her method.

She pushed forward into the crowd, keeping her eyes on the blue velvet picture hat. It moved diagonally, toward the Chinese herbalist's wagon. Now, after ten o'clock, most of the women had departed, their places taken by Cocktail Route travelers on a postprandial stroll, after which many would visit the establishments of the wicked Barbary Coast. The woman in the blue hat would be there too, plying her trade upon the unsuspecting—unless Sabina could stop her.

The blue hat now brushed against the shoulder of a tall blond man clad in an elegant broadloom suit. The perfect victim.

Sabina weaved her way through men who had stopped to hear Rodney Strongheart sing in a loud baritone about how his elixir would keep one's heart beating forever. A few gave her disapproving glances: She should not be here at this hour, and she certainly shouldn't be elbowing them aside.

Sabina continued to use her elbows.

Now she was beside the woman. She reached for her arm and missed it just as the man in broadloom groaned and clutched his side. Sabina saw the dip's right hand move to his inner pocket; she was quick, and the man's purse was soon in her grasp.

But not soon enough to make her escape.

Sabina grasped the woman's right hand, which held the purse, and pinned the dip's arm behind her back. The pickpocket struggled, and Sabina pulled the arm higher until she cried out and then was still.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The victim had recovered from his pain. He stared at Sabina, then at the thief. Sabina reached down and wrested the blue-and-gold Charles Horner hatpin from the woman's hand.

"And that," John Quincannon said, "was the last of the Carville Ghost." He looked pleased with himself, sitting at his desk, smiling and stroking his freebooter's beard—a feature that made him appear rakish and dangerous. He fancied himself the world's finest detective and he always preened a bit when he brought an investigation to a successful conclusion.

"And," he added, "I have collected the fee. A not inconsiderable twenty-five hundred dollars. I would say that justifies dinner for two at Marchand's and perhaps—"

Sabina interrupted his description of his evening's plans for them. "I, too, have collected a handsome fee. From Charles Ackerman."

"Ah, you solved the pickpocketing case."

"Yes." She proceeded to tell him about it, including the man who had died, Henry Holbrooke, finishing, "I thought the woman—Sarah Wilds—was preying upon infirm men, perhaps men in gastric distress. It turned out she was stealing from perfectly healthy men, stabbing them in the side with her needle-thin hatpin to distract them while she picked their pockets."

"Needle-thin?" John frowned. "I presented you with a silver-and-coral Charles Horner hatpin on your last birthday. As I recall, it was fairly thick."

"Sarah Wilds had altered hers so the pin would pass through clothing and flesh but not cause the victim to bleed much, if at all. Just a painful prick, and she'd withdraw it while reaching for her victim's valuables."

"But the man who died—Harry Holbrooke?"

"Henry. The police assume he was unlucky. The pin went in too deeply, punctured an organ, and caused bleeding and an infection. You must remember—Sarah Wilds was using the same pin over and over; think of the bacteria it carried."

John nodded. "Another job well done, my dear. Now, about Marchand's and perhaps—"

"I accept your invitation upon one condition."

"And that is?"

"You will pay for your evening from the proceeds of your Carville investigation, and I will pay for mine from my proceeds."

John, as Sabina had known he would, bristled. "A lady paying her own way on a celebratory evening—unthinkable!"

"You had best think about it, because those are my terms."

He sighed—a long exhalation—and scowled fiercely. But as she knew he would, he said, "An evening out with you, my dear, is acceptable under any terms or conditions."

As was an evening out with him.●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Erstwhile Groom

by Laura Benedict

Kurt follows his wife, Livia, through the kitchen, which is dim even at midday because of the heavy awning shading the room's single window. She pushes open the basement door, presses the light switch, and stands aside so he can carry the bags of canned goods downstairs.

"Yams," he says. "Twenty-nine cents a can. You can't beat that."

"Lunch is on the table," she says. "We're out of pickle loaf."

He knows how much Livia likes pickle loaf, but it won't be on special again, he thinks, until the next week.

"Monday," he says from the basement. "Can it wait until Monday?"

Livia doesn't answer. He hears her footsteps clip across the linoleum. Always she wears shoes that he believes other women would wear for dancing, smooth leather shoes with high, chunky heels and deep vamps that hint at the cleavage between her toes. The shoes make her legs look long and elegant. He's never liked how Livia shows off her legs; though she's almost fifty, other men still stare at her.

Kurt sets the grocery bags on the floor and tugs gently at the window shade that acts as a dust cover for the storage shelves on the wall. The shade is crisp and cracked in a few places now, and does not roll as smoothly as it used to. He feels along the top shelf for the grease pencil he uses to date canned goods. He will date them and arrange them on the shelves, oldest in front and newest to the back, knowing full well that Livia doesn't appreciate his efforts. She will quickly raise the shade, reach in, and take whatever can she cares to, regardless of the date. It's no wonder, he thinks, that she's never noticed that there's something not quite right about the shelves, that they aren't as deep as they might be.

It's been over twenty years since Kurt last entered the window-

"I'm living proof that dreams do come true," says Laura Benedict. "I wrote fiction for almost 20 years before selling my novel *Isabella Moon* (releasing in September) to Ballantine Books." The book is not, however, the author's first major fiction sale. She debuted in our Department of First Stories in '01 under the byline Laura Philpot Benedict. †

©2007 by Laura Benedict

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

less room hidden behind the shelves, with its rough stone walls and hard-packed dirt floor. The room had been his childhood hideaway, its floor the dusty terrain of his elaborate war games. It was a place to hide from his mother and her incessant piano playing, a place to run to when his father came home red-faced and frustrated with work.

When they moved in, their house was one of the larger ones on the street, with a backyard that sloped gently toward the alley behind it. Inside, its many rooms were small, but rather grand, with high, decorated ceilings. But it had languished in disrepair. They might never have found the false wall if his father hadn't had to install a new boiler in the basement. The door hidden behind the wall was so small that Kurt, still just a boy, had to lower his head to get through it.

Kurt stood close beside his father, who held a lantern that cast flickering shadows on the walls. His chest felt tight, as though the musty room were sucking the breath from his lungs. The floor was swept clean except for an old ticking mattress in the corner; cobwebs dangled from the ceiling's wooden beams. It looked to Kurt like a dungeon prison from an old book. When his father held the lantern close to a wall, they could see that many of the deep scratches covering it were words, the confusing lines rude maps.

"Sklaven," *said his father. Slaves. "The neighbors will all want to come and see," he said, with some irritation. He told Kurt and his mother to keep the room a secret.*

Livia's lunch is frugal: a piece of rye bread smeared with cream cheese and a few olives. She never complains to Kurt, though, about the lunches he asks her to make for him: the sandwiches of Braunschweiger and boiled egg or of gelatinous head cheese accompanied by fresh potato salad made with celery and sweet pickles. He likes to eat a big meal at lunch and a smaller supper that will not weigh heavily on his stomach and cause him to lose sleep.

Kurt's sleep is precious. Many nights he lies for hours beside Livia in the room that used to be his mother's, listening to her gentle, even breaths. There in the dark, his hands aching with arthritis, he tells himself that the door behind the basement shelves is more than secure, that the corpse of Danny Kelley will rest on the other side of it always, undisturbed.

Before Kurt is able to pick up his sandwich, the kitchen door slams and his daughter, Mitzy, runs through the kitchen and into the dining room. Her nose is running and her face is splotched with red, but she doesn't stop even to tell them why she has been crying.

"Mitzy, what is it?" Livia gets up and follows her down the hall

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and upstairs.

Kurt stares at his plate. This young man, this Brent, to whom Mitzy is engaged, has brought them nothing but grief. Twice, already, Mitzy has called off the wedding, and Kurt is hoping in his heart that this time will be the end of it.

Mitzy is sweetly feminine, all smiles and grace. She has Livia's lush dark hair and thin frame. Her fair skin is prone to delicate round beauty marks. Mitzy's tender heart disturbs Kurt. Over the years, he has turned away many boys from their door, boys who were sure that Mitzy would want to see them, talk to them, because she'd let herself become too friendly and confiding. She lacks her mother's dignity, her iron core.

Livia was the one who helped him pick out a flower for his lapel every morning in her aunt's florist shop, where he would stop on his way in to work. With her slightly almond-shaped eyes, trim waist, and fashionable clothes, Livia was an exotic for Kurt, so different from the zaftig German girls in the neighborhood—various Karins and Heidis and Gretchens, the ones his mother was always trying to get him to date. What did it matter to him that he was already thirty and unmarried and living with his widowed mother? What did it matter to him that the one time he asked Livia to dinner, she blushed and stammered, finally making an excuse he knew to be a lie?

Kurt was in no hurry. He knew that, eventually, he would have Livia for his own.

On Sundays, he began to go to the late Mass so he could sit a few rows behind Livia and her aunt. And was it wrong that he observed her every step as she walked, alone, to the high school for the Wednesday evening meetings of the Sweet Songbirds club? Once, and only once, he'd hidden himself in the doorway of McSorley's pub until she passed by, stepping out to greet her, pretending that their meeting was an accident. From the amused sparkle in her eyes, he could tell she'd been surprised—did he dare even think, pleased?

Friday nights were for bingo at the church hall, where Kurt would sit with his mother until the last cards were played. If he chanced to meet Livia's eye from where she sat with her girlfriends—he was very careful, usually, not to draw attention to himself—she would give him a friendly, if diffident, wave. After bingo, he would dally outside the church, watching her walk away until his mother agitated to be taken home. Who was to know that he went out again after his mother was safely tucked in bed? The alley beside the florist shop was soaked in darkness, except for the light in a second-floor window that he believed to be Livia's. When it went out, he could go home and sleep a little better knowing she was safe inside.

Kurt sees the lights of a car swing into the driveway just before nine. He knows immediately that it is the boyfriend, or *fiancé,* as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Livia would have him called.

"Papa?" Mitzy's voice comes down the stairs.

Kurt goes to answer the frantic knock at the back door.

Livia has a satin-bound photograph, hidden, she thinks, in the cedar chest at the foot of their bed. In it, a young Livia, looking unhealthily slender in a narrow-waisted, polka-dot dress, stands close to Danny Kelley, who wears a pencil-thin moustache that rides above a small, almost feminine mouth. His right arm encircles Livia's waist and appears to Kurt, even over the distance of years, to be pulling her to him, forcing her body against his in an intimate, frankly sexual way. There is a look of casual cruelty in his eyes.

But what of the beautiful Livia, her eyes filled with a tenderness that causes a brief, painful swelling in Kurt's throat each time he takes the photograph from its hiding place? Her chestnut hair gathers in soft waves across her shoulders and drops a few teasing inches down her back in the style of a sultry Hedy Lamarr. Her arm, graceful in the draped sleeve of the dress, reaches possessively (protectively, perhaps?) across the man's chest. This is surely not the Livia who stood beside Kurt in the dimly lit Lady Chapel at St. Mark's Catholic Church, those same fingers pressed into his own large hand as the priest led them through their vows. That Livia's still-young mouth had acquired new lines and she stood with a stiffness that the girl in the photo would have mocked. An aura of happiness radiates from the photographed Livia, a laughing, confident kind of happiness that *his* Livia surely could not imagine.

Kurt turns on the porch light, illuminating the boy's face through the glass, and wonders that Livia can bear to see him each time he comes to the house. This boy, this Brent whom Mitzy met at a dance at the armory—but for his smooth upper lip and modern haircut—is the image of the young man with Livia in the photograph. Kurt even asked Livia once if Brent reminded her of anyone. But she just said, "No," and went on reading her book. It bothered him that she didn't even ask him why he'd wanted to know.

Kurt opens the door only the width of his body. "Yes?" he says. "What is it?"

Brent stands with his hands shoved into the back pockets of his blue jeans; he wears a bulky green letter jacket that is too hot for the weather. On its breast is the image of a halo shot through with a flaming arrow. He gives Kurt a toothy smile.

"Hey, Mr. R.," he says. "Is Mitzy here?"

"Mitzy is unavailable. I don't know the particulars."

Brent shakes his head. The smile is gone, replaced by a look of intense sincerity. "It's just a misunderstanding, Mr. R. A miscommunication, you'd call it. Mitzy needs to hear what I have to say."

The air about the boy smells of flowers. Kurt thinks that per-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

haps the lilies of the valley on the other side of the porch are releasing their scent, but the smell is stronger, sharper. He realizes that the boy is wearing some kind of perfume.

"If I could come in just for a minute," Brent says. He lowers his voice, taking Kurt into his confidence. "See, there's this girl, and she's been pestering me an awful lot. She won't leave me alone. She's just this girl, this kid from the neighborhood."

"I'm sure Mitzy will call you at some point," Kurt says. He's not interested in the boy's pitiful confessions. He takes a handkerchief from a rear pocket, blows his nose loudly into it, and stuffs it back into his pants.

Out in the yard, a yellow rectangle of light shining down from Mitzy's window blinks out. Beneath the sound of traffic humming on the road in front of the house, Kurt thinks he hears a window sliding quietly open. He wants this boy to go away so he can start making his way toward bed. If he goes to bed much past nine o'clock, he doesn't sleep well.

"Look," Brent says, changing his tack. He takes a step toward Kurt. "Mitzy's over eighteen. Right? She gets to make her own decisions. And you need to tell her that I'm here and that I want to see her."

When Mitzy first came home that afternoon, Kurt thought that she and the young man would have to work things out themselves. But he sees that he has made a number of wrong assumptions about the young man. Acutely aware that Brent probably outweighs him by twenty pounds and has at least an inch of height on him, Kurt steps out of the doorway and grabs him roughly by the upper arm. "It's time for you to leave, now. You've got nothing to say to anyone here."

Brent jerks away, his lip twisted in a sneer.

"Go on," Kurt says. He's worried that if he says more his voice will shake.

Brent shouts up to the window above them. "Mitzy! Mitzy, come down and call off your old man!"

The two of them stand frozen in the porch light, each waiting, perhaps, for Mitzy to answer or for the other to move or speak. Kurt is no longer tired—the surge of fear, or anger, whatever it was that prompted him to lay hands on the boy, has energized him and made him feel suddenly younger, more vital.

"Mitzy!"

Above them, the window slams shut.

"Don't imagine this changes anything," the boy says to Kurt. "You watch how everything will be just fine, tomorrow." He gives Kurt a cheerful salute and starts up the steps into the yard. He pauses and leans down to pick up a handful of smooth pebbles from around the steps. Turning back to the house, he throws the pebbles at the window so that they spatter against the glass like fat, noisy raindrops.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kurt watches the car back out of the driveway, its headlights bouncing clumsily as a single wheel rises up over the curb and then down again. His heart is still pounding as the car speeds down the alley, spewing gravel into the night air. He knows that Eda Hidebaugh in the house next-door is probably watching from her darkened window, but he's angry enough that he doesn't care.

One Wednesday evening, Livia left her aunt's shop, but didn't go to the high school. As Kurt followed almost a block behind, she walked more quickly than usual, despite her high heels. She passed by McSorley's and turned, heading toward the Irish part of town—a part of town where Kurt didn't like to go, where there were gangs of young men and teenagers who intimidated him and made him wish he carried a gun, even a small one, in the pocket of his jacket. But Livia walked confidently. The streets were quiet, with few people sitting out on their stoops. When Livia did pass a group of boys on a corner, Kurt was too far back to hear what they said to her. He only heard a shout and a laugh from one of the boys, but Livia kept walking and they didn't follow her. Relieved that he wasn't going to have to reveal himself to defend her (With no weapon, what would he have done? He told himself that his fists would have been enough.), Kurt jogged across to the other side of the street for several blocks, still keeping Livia in sight.

Nothing could have prepared him for what he saw next. Livia stopped in front of a pub he didn't know and reached out her hand to the man there who was obviously waiting for her. Kurt hurried forward, watching as they embraced, watching as the man wrapped his arms around Livia and slid one hand down her back to rest it just at the top of the swell of her behind. (So many times Kurt had imagined putting his own hand just there. He could almost feel the linen of her dress beneath his own fingertips.) But instead of pushing the man away, Livia seemed to cling more tightly to him, kissing him harder.

The next morning, Kurt learns from Mitzy and Livia that things have been decided. Livia calls the priest at St. Mark's to let him know that the wedding is off, and asks Kurt to drive her to the florist and the dressmaker's to see about settling the bills even though she knows Thursday is his library day. It looks to him as if the whole foolish affair is going to cost him a least a couple hundred dollars. But he thinks it might almost be worth it not to have that particular young man sitting at his dinner table again, eating his food and drinking his beer. He is glad that Mitzy will not have children with Brent, attractive, sneaky children whom he would have to guard against, to prevent them from stealing his small treasures, like the tiny jade turtles his godfather had brought him from Japan, or doing noisy things out in the yard that the neigh-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bors could gossip about. Kurt flushes with shame at the thought of having such grandchildren.

Livia comes out of the florist's wearing an irritated look. *More money,* he thinks. They had saved for Mitzy's wedding, but he had hoped that it would come a few years later, after the money had gained more interest.

"They wanted half the final bill," Livia says, getting into the Chevrolet.

"We're not going to pay it," Kurt says. "They can try to come and get it from me."

Livia shuts the door. "I already gave them a check," she says.

Kurt drives away from the florist's in silence. Is this how things are going to be, now that he is retired? Did she think that she would be making the money decisions? If he'd had any idea, he would've stayed on the city payroll, no matter how good the early retirement deal had been.

"I'll deal with the dressmaker," he says. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the edge of Livia's mouth lift just slightly. Is she laughing at him? He chooses to think that, given what she'd just done, she wouldn't dare.

Danny Kelley was known to Kurt, and many others, as a small-time criminal who dealt in liquor and cigarettes without tax stamps, even some marijuana. Kurt was astounded that his Livia would be involved with such a man.

The lovers met the next Wednesday, and the next. It was on a Monday morning that Kurt came into the shop to find that Livia was gone.

Brent's car is in the driveway when they get home. Eda Hidebaugh stands with a hose, watering the plot of struggling strawberry plants at the edge of her yard. Kurt can tell by the way she tries to wave them over that she wants to talk.

"She *would* have to be out here," Livia says. "Will you deal with her too?"

"Why are you making a joke?" Kurt says. "Just go inside."

They walk together to the back door. Hearing Eda's tremulous *Hello,* Kurt doesn't turn around, but raises his hand in a brief wave.

The kitchen is cool and silent in the midday heat. Mitzy has remembered to close the windows before noon. Kurt wonders what state he'll find her in with Brent there. He tells himself that they should have known better than to believe her when she told them that she wanted nothing to do with him ever again. But she'd seemed so resolute that morning, her tears dried, her voice calm. It hadn't been like the other times she'd called off the wedding when she'd been almost hysterical in her vehemence. Her mercurial nature

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was a puzzlement to him. He wondered if it didn't have something to do with Livia's having an Italian grandmother on her father's side.

"Mitzy?" Livia calls softly down the hallway. Kurt follows her. He doesn't like how quiet the house is. He expected weeping, or words of anger—not this fraught silence.

Livia enters the light-filled living room a second before him. "Oh good Christ," she says.

Kurt looks down to the floor to see his daughter, her blouse open and her skirt kicked away, lying beneath Brent, whose bare behind is glaringly white in the sunshine. Mitzy makes a low moaning sound; it is not a sound of passion, but of the deepest pain.

Kurt pushes Livia out of his way and grabs Brent by the shoulders, expecting to get him off of Mitzy and give him the beating of his life. But when he tries to lift Brent away, the weight is such that he can only shove him to the side and onto the rug. It's then that he sees the kitchen knife jutting from the wound on Brent's neck and the blood soaking his daughter's half-naked body. Freed, Mitzy rolls slowly onto her side and curls into a ball, still moaning, sounding as though she will never stop.

Danny Kelley lived in a row house down near the river. Kurt bought a car with the money he'd been saving to buy a ring for Livia and took to spending hours in the hillside park overlooking the shabby neighborhood, waiting, watching for signs of Danny Kelley and Livia coming and going from the house. Livia wore different clothes—even her walk was different, more languorous, seductive. He was losing her a little more each day.

Brent's body is heavy, but Kurt must wrestle with it alone. Livia has taken Mitzy upstairs to bathe and calm her. He could hardly bear to watch as Mitzy shambled away, her head pressed to her mother's side, Livia's arm supporting her. It's best that neither of them should see what he is going to do.

The shelves are so stiff on their supports that Kurt nearly falls back more than once onto the cans littering the basement floor as he yanks them off the wall. Twenty-some years of rust and dirt has secured them even with the shades he'd hung as protection. He stacks the shelves against the wall and stands looking at the exposed door.

Danny Kelley struggled.

It was late afternoon, just before five o'clock, when they approached the shabby roadhouse on the Kentucky side of the river. Kurt had followed Danny Kelley there before and knew where to pull off the road and into the trees as Danny Kelley went on to the roadhouse's driveway—in fact, Kurt knew enough about Danny Kelley's routes to offer them to any policeman who wanted to know.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

How easy would it have been just to have Danny Kelley arrested. But then Livia would have been shamed further, and Kurt would never have had her. His pride demanded that much.

Kurt got out of his car and moved quickly through the thin woods separating him from the roadhouse. Several yards from Danny Kelley's flashy Buick, he stopped, watching as Danny Kelley, loaded down with a pair of crates, was let inside the building.

At first, Kurt hadn't any idea but that he would wrap his hands around Danny Kelley's throat and squeeze the life from him, but as he slipped into the back of the Buick his hand came to rest on one of the ropes Danny Kelley used to secure his bottles.

He waited, barely breathing. Sweat ran in a rivulet down one of his temples and into his eye. As he twisted the coarse rope in his hands, his decision—which had seemed, in the beginning, to be a painfully obvious one—began to feel to him like madness, like a fever that had overtaken him, but was now cooling.

Before he could reflect on his thought's logical conclusion—that a sane man would simply have declared his love for Livia and wooed her with gifts and letters and promises, as, surely, Danny Kelley had done—Danny Kelley was in the car and had started the engine. Kurt fought against the urge to close his eyes as he dropped the rope around Danny Kelley's neck and jerked it backwards, knocking the man's cheap straw hat to the seat. Danny Kelley's hands were suddenly in his hair, grabbing frantically at Kurt's ears; his fingers jammed into Kurt's eyes and nostrils. Only the Buick's enormous steering wheel kept Danny Kelley in his seat as his body tried to arch away from Kurt. It seemed to Kurt that an hour passed before Danny Kelley stopped moving. The rope felt as though it had seared itself into Kurt's flesh, but for a long time he was afraid to let it go.

Brent's body lies on the basement floor, wrapped in the area rug from the living room, surrounded by cans of apples, carrots, green beans, corn, stew, yams, beets, and sauerkraut. Only the rug's padding, which Livia had insisted that they buy when they brought the rug home, had kept the blood from soaking through to the living room's wood floor.

It takes some work to get the door to the hidden room open; Kurt forgot that he had nailed it shut. As he works, he can't get the image of Brent's face in death out of his mind. The boy's pale forehead was broad and open, his empty eyes a bright, honest blue. He was from good German stock. Brent, even though he'd sometimes treated Mitzy shabbily, always had an air of innocence about him that Danny Kelley had never had. He was nothing like Danny Kelley.

Finally, the door is open. Kurt is afraid to look inside the room, but he steels himself and squats down to inch his way in, the beam of a flashlight leading him on.

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kurt lay in bed, looking at his burned and swollen hands. His hands had killed a man, yet he felt little remorse. It would take time for Livia to come to him, he knew. But he would be there for her, waiting.

"Kurt!" His mother's voice was a fierce whisper.

Kurt sat up to see his mother in the doorway in her long nightgown, her gray and black hair hanging over her shoulders.

"There's someone in the house," she said. "In the basement."

"No," Kurt said. "There's no one there." But he felt the fear rising in his body.

"He's pounding on something," she said. "I can hear him."

Kurt couldn't speak. No one had broken into the house. The knowledge that Danny Kelley was still alive down in the hidden room flooded over him.

"Go!" she said. "You're the man now, Kurt. Do you think your father wouldn't go and see? You get his gun from the bureau. I will call the police."

Kurt, his hands shaking, went to his father's empty room and got the gun.

"Don't call the police," he whispered as he went downstairs. "Promise me you won't call. Let me do this."

"You call," she said. "I don't want to go back down there."

He closed the bedroom door and heard her lock it behind him.

In the dark kitchen, he opened the basement door and stood, listening, to Danny Kelley.

The musty air of the room steals his breath away just as it had when he had first stood there beside his father a lifetime ago. The beam from the flashlight picks out a pair of shoes lying in the middle of the floor. They are surrounded by toy soldiers—a hundred or more—and look like giant fortresses that the soldiers had been unable to scale.

Knowing that the shoes cannot be all that is left of Danny Kelley, Kurt forces himself to slide the beam across the wall, where he sees the familiar scratchings of the slaves who'd once hidden themselves here. But he doesn't stop to examine them. They are nothing to him.

He finds Danny Kelley, who is little more than a dusty pile of outdated, cheap clothes with bits of bone sticking out of them, in the corner behind the door. For more than twenty years, the Danny Kelley of his nightmares and dreams was a ghoul, a half-alive creature who lived behind a door that was twenty times the size of the one standing open behind Kurt. Danny Kelley was the echo of a hoarse voice, cries punctuated by the sound of weakening fists pounding at the door. But the bugs—the eaters of the dead—had long ago made their way through the hard-packed dirt and found Danny Kelley.

Finally unafraid, Kurt inspects the wall nearest the skeleton to see if maybe Danny Kelley had scratched Livia's name into the wall with his dying strength. But Kurt had emptied Danny Kelley's pockets before putting him in the room, taking his cigarettes,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

money, keys, and matches. Danny Kelley had died in the dark, an erstwhile groom forever separated from his bride. But he would no longer be alone.

Kurt's mother would not leave the house until it was over. For those first few days, the most worrisome days, the days when Kurt would begin to shake and sweat at work thinking about Danny Kelley, she would play the piano for hours on end to keep from hearing the noise coming from the basement. At night she played the radio just loudly enough. She would make Kurt cold suppers so she wouldn't have to linger too near the basement door. They would eat on the back porch or upstairs in his father's old bedroom. Then, for a whole day, then two, then three, they heard nothing.

Kurt replaces the shelves and restocks them, filling a single bag to take upstairs. He crumples the empty bag that had held the fertilizer he'd hurriedly sprinkled over Brent's body at the last moment, hoping that it had enough lime in it to have some effect.

He finds Livia sitting at the dining room table. Livia—who he knows is made of iron inside—sits slumped over the table with her head resting on her arms. His heart aches for her, for Mitzy. At his touch, Livia looks up. Her face is lined with care, but she hasn't been crying. It is Mitzy who will be their biggest worry.

Kurt sits in the chair beside her rather than at his usual place at the head of the table. Upstairs, Mitzy, with the help of a couple of painkillers from an old prescription, is finally sleeping.

"I was thinking," Kurt says softly, "of who Brent reminded me of."

Livia shakes her head. "No, not now," she says. She reaches out to cover Kurt's hand briefly with her own, then goes into the kitchen. Kurt hears her get a glass from the cabinet and turn on the faucet. The water runs and runs, and the sweet, domestic sound of it blends with his single thought: She knows about everything.

For the benefit of Eda Hidebaugh, when it is full dark, Livia combs back her hair and Kurt helps her don Brent's letter jacket. He watches as she backs Brent's car out into the alley and drives away to leave it in the lot of a bar to which he often took Mitzy. A half-hour later, praying that Mitzy will stay in her stuporous sleep, Kurt picks up Livia and drops her off a few blocks from home.

He is waiting when Livia comes in by the front door, which is hidden from Eda Hidebaugh's gaze. When she holds out the handkerchief that he had given her to wipe her fingerprints from the car, Kurt takes her into his arms to pull her firmly to him. Her body feels soft and malleable to him, as though he could pull her close enough that they could become one person. She belongs to him now, and no one else.●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Remote Control

by Mick Herron

It starts on a train. Maurice's fault. Maurice is about my age, but since his divorce, he's let himself go: his suits overdue a dry-cleaning; his shirts frayed at the cuff. Some days, he could stand a little closer to the shower. To hear him tell it, though, he's better off.

"Finally I get a little peace," he says. "That woman could talk for England. They should record her phone calls for training purposes."

Mick Herron's last book to see print in the U.S., *Why We Die*, received a starred review from *PW*, which praised his series P.I., Zoë Boehm, as "smart, dogged, and never down for the count." Mr. Herron is a master plotter, and manages here to create both a clever twist and an interesting snap-shot of modern London. †

But for all the spin, it's not just his cuffs that are frayed lately. Small things rattle Maurice's cage. Some days we don't get a seat—it's a busy line—and once he'd have grinned and deployed those origami skills commuters develop for reading newspapers upright in a crowd. Now he seethes instead, staring grimly out of the window as if, instead of fields and dormitory towns, we're flashing through a post-nuclear landscape. His hair needs attention. He still has good teeth, though.

"Jesus," he tells me. "They should make it a crime."

"Make what a crime, Maurice?"

"Coming into the capital without due purpose," he says. "Some of these dumbbells, they're going shopping, can you believe it? They get on a train, eight-ten in the morning, they're going shopping on Regent Street. So us poor working stiffs have to stand. Hell of a way to prepare for the day ahead."

"Most of them have jobs, Maurice."

"The ones that don't should be stuffed in the luggage racks."

I have a job. I work in corporate finance, and earn nicely without causing outrage. And Maurice has a job. His company operates CCTV systems. I sometimes wonder if it's the vaguely Hollywood flavour of this that has tinted his speech with Americanisms. And, too, he sees a lot of bad behaviour. Maurice doesn't monitor screens himself, but what he calls the show-stopper stuff gets

©2007 by Mick Herron

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spliced onto tapes and shown at parties. His outfit has a security contract which puts cameras along the South Bank, all the way to the Isle of Dogs. He's seen people screwing against the wall in broad daylight, and not just professionally, either. Muggings, of course; rapes, fistfights, stabbings. Politicians arm in arm with local gangsters. Last year he seemed happy in his work, but as the days grind by, the wells we draw from sink deeper. Maurice has a new boss, and this is a travesty of justice. Maurice should have been the new boss—not this punk, which is how Maurice refers to him. "This punk," he says. "This goddamn kid." This goddamn kid is ten years younger, two stone lighter, and fifteen grand a year richer than Maurice is right now. Maurice feels he's been gazumped. "That was my job," he says. "Goddamn punk came out of nowhere."

Remain detached, I want to tell him. *Stay in control.* Or you will rupture one day; burst one of those complicated valves that keep the heart pumping. *Once you let the rage inside, it's hard to get it out.* Trust me. I know about this.

Maurice hasn't mentioned the boss in a while. New angers blossom daily.

"Freakin' personalised numberplates," he says this morning. "Don't you hate them?"

"They have their uses," I say. "Easy to remember."

"Yeah, well, I'm not forgetting this one in a hurry."

And he goes into a spiel about being cut off by a red sports car at the weekend. Maurice was entirely in the right. These twits in their flash motors: Decapitation would be too quick.

"She was driving," he says. "But it's him I remember. Shaved bald, and when did that get to be cool? I remember in the good old days, your chrome-domes had the grace to be ashamed."

He wore an earring, too, and Maurice has much to say on this subject.

"I figure he had his hand up her skirt, and that's how come she was in a rush. Looked old enough to be his big sister."

The train pulls into platform 8, and the long forever of its gradual halt begins; the release of its doors.

"Whoosh," he says, and I think he's imitating the doors, but he isn't. "W-H-O-O-5-H. The S was a 5."

On the concourse, we make our usual farewells.

"Don't let the bastards grind you down," he warns me.

"Remember," I tell him. "They can kill you. But they're not allowed to eat you."

But I say it distractedly, because my mind is elsewhere.

If you want to know where it gets you—letting the rage inside—keep your eyes open as you slog around the city. You'll see people behaving like all kinds of weather at once: fizzing and spitting; boiling and baked; grey and grim. Just by walking where some-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

body else wants to be, you're making mortal enemies for life. Somebody asked me "What the hell?" last week because I slowed to check a shop window, and I've no doubt he thought it a reasonable question. Trench warfare has its critics, but city life is no picnic either. A *Daily Mail* columnist once spent a morning on the pavement outside Bond Street station, and not a soul stopped to check he wasn't dead. Though to be fair, they might have recognised him. One less *Mail* columnist would brighten anyone's day.

Remain detached. Stay in control. Or you will rupture; burst a complicated valve.

Trust me, because I know about this. I killed a man once. It was mostly an accident. It happened years ago, when I was a student, over a girl: a girl I hadn't even spoken to, but told a friend about, and next thing I knew they were going steady. It seemed to me that he would never have looked her way if I'd not pointed her out. You dream your dreams aloud, and they come true for someone else. I waited for him after the pubs shut one night, on the towpath he used as a shortcut. He was drunk, and might well have ended up in the canal even if I'd not been there—which, as far as the world was concerned, was the case. The following day it seemed like a strange dream. Now, I recall it as a warning: *Remain detached; stay in control.* There are angry places in each of us, and we visit them at our peril. I can't even remember that girl's name.

The things that are precious remain worth fighting for. But I've learned to let go of the space around me. I don't ask strangers "What the hell?" because I already know what the hell.

I've only ever told one person about the man I killed.

I don't see Maurice on the evening train, because he usually goes to the pub. Instead, I stare out of the window as the world goes whooshing by. I have bought flowers for Emma, which is something I do: It's not a birthday thing, or an anniversary thing, or even a Friday-night thing. It is a recurring statement of intent: *I will always bring you flowers.* Tonight they are roses, and to my fellow passengers possibly look like an apology. But I have nothing to be sorry for, and intend to keep it that way.

Emma hums as she arranges the roses in a vase.

"How was your day?" she asks.

"It was fine. Yours?"

"Same old, same old," she says, and this is our private joke. Emma does not work—I earn enough for both of us—and her same old is someone else's leisure.

I potter around the sitting room as she prepares the supper. I drink a glass of white, and pick things up and put them down—ornaments, books, a candlestick; a pale silk scarf left draped across a chair—and remember where each came from, and which were my gifts to her. It is not only flowers I bring her: I buy gifts. That scarf;

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this candlestick. I made her a present long ago of my deepest secret: of the man I killed on a lonely stretch of canal, unobserved by God or anyone. She wept—we both did—but she understood what my telling her meant: that I was placing all I was, and ever hoped to be, in her hands. Ever since, I've known we'll never drift apart.

I bought her those books, those CDs, and the pictures on our walls.

And last year, for her birthday, as a special treat, I bought her a smart red sports car.

With a personalised numberplate.

Remain in control. Stay detached.

Maurice says, "Why so interested? I told you all this yesterday, you're like yeah, yeah, are we nearly there yet?"

We have seats this morning. There's never any telling which days are going to be crowded; which are going to be like somebody declared a Bank Holiday and never told you. Maurice sits opposite me, and I can see he's missed a spot shaving; one of those difficult places under the chin that mirrors don't always notice, but wives do.

"It's just bad behaviour," I tell him.

"Well, it wasn't the only kind of bad behaviour on their mind. I can promise you that."

He reminds me that it happened in the Cotswolds, then goes off on a tangent, telling me why he was there himself. I spend the interlude recalling that Emma had gone shopping on Saturday afternoon.

"Couple of miles along the road, I see the car parked by a wood. Like they're nature-lovers, right? Guy with a shaved head, a freakin' *earring,* the only wildlife he's interested in is a bit of outdoors horizontal jogging."

Maurice can be loud sometimes. His words riffle through the carriage like a cat in long grass.

That day, I call Emma twice from work. She answers both times. I say I just wanted to hear her voice.

"That's sweet."

And in the evening, I dig out our most recent phone bill. Emma has a mobile—of course she does—so there's no earthly reason a landline should betray her. Even so, there are numbers I don't recognise. But Google tells me they're innocent. Mail-order firms; the local library. A plumber. For a while I entertain visions of Emma wrapped in highly coordinated intercourse with an overalled handyman, plungers and piping arrayed all around. But then I recall a leaky tap in the upstairs bathroom. Of course she called a plumber. Who else is going to fix a leaky tap?

"You're very quiet," she says over supper. "Is everything all right?"

She's a beautiful woman, Emma; more beautiful to me than anyone else, it's true. But beautiful. It always surprises me that she doesn't take a good photo. I buy her gifts; when you get down to it, I feed and clothe her. But none of this makes her my possession. She

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is my wife, and that places her deeply inside my space, but she's not my possession. In my absence, who knows where she walks?

"I'm fine," I tell her. "Everything is fine."

"We're strictly audio-visual, our end," Maurice says. "And v. much aboveboard. Public stuff, like the South Bank getout, plus offices and home security systems and all that. What you're talking about's bugging. You can buy phone taps over the counter, or over the Internet, same difference. But it's legally touchy. You put up signs saying this area's under remote surveillance, everyone knows where they stand. Nobody puts up a sign saying this phone's tapped. And if you did, you could put up another one saying out of order, you'd get more traffic on it."

The device, which arrives at my office from friendlyear.com, is no bigger than a watch battery, and transmits to a recorder the size of a memory stick. *Feel more secure,* the packaging invites, though its actual purpose is to confirm one's insecurities. The instructions read like they've been translated from the Portuguese by someone who speaks only French, but owns two dictionaries.

It weighs my pocket down as I leave, and I wonder if the dogs at the station will bark me out—the police dogs that wait on the concourse, trained to sniff for bombs, guns, and fear.

On the train, Maurice says, "You're looking pressured. Markets heading for a fall?"

It is such a surprise that Maurice notices anything beyond his own concerns that I'm not sure how to answer. "Same old, same old," I say at last.

He looks out on a darkening view of warehouse yards and traffic jams. "Tell me about it. We've got a citywide systems check on—every camera, every lens, every angle. Guess which muggins gets to coordinate that little lot?"

"Don't the cameras get checked all the time?"

"Individually, yes. This is a systems audit." He leans forward. "Means we have to close whole chunks of it down. You want to pull some riverside mischief and not get caught, this week's good."

"I presume you're not advertising that."

"Jesus, don't joke." He brushes imaginary crumbs from his lapel. The real ketchup stain on his tie is unimpressed. "Big Brother never sleeps. That's our story, anyway."

At home, I place the bug on the standard lamp. The recorder goes in a drawer. It's noise-activated, which means that when nothing's happening, it goes to sleep. Along with hours of sound, it can capture aeons of unremembered silence.

"What are your plans for the rest of the week?" I ask Emma over supper; a strangely formal construction.

"I thought I might go up to London one morning. Do some shop-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ping. But don't worry, I'll avoid the commuter crush."

"That's good," I say. "Maurice doesn't like noncombatants stealing our seats."

She smiles at this. She knows Maurice.

All night it rains, and I lie awake wondering if the pattering on the windows will trigger the bug. Already I can picture myself listening to it: hours of secondhand rain; a memory of overnight weather.

Emma hums as she moves from room to room; she hums as she changes the roses' water. And talks to herself, too, snatches of dialogue—single words, mostly—meant to act as memos-to-self: *milk,* she will say, for obvious reasons, or *oven,* less obviously. She takes a call on her mobile, and walks out of range while gossiping with a book-club friend. I hear all this hours later, in the bathroom, the recorder's earpiece clamped to my head.

She interrupts my surveillance by calling upstairs.

I go down to eat, and admire her food. I applaud the industry with which she passes her days. I notice that the oven sparkles; its ceramic buffed and polished. My attentions amuse her.

"Sometimes you act like a brand-new husband," she tells me.

"Would you like a brand-new husband?" I ask.

"I'm quite content with the old one," she says. "But it's nice to be appreciated."

Later, I return to the bathroom, and continue listening to the day's messages.

More humming.

Light bulbs.

The friendly clatter of a woman preparing to go out, followed an unknowable amount of time later by the sound of the same woman returning home.

She takes a call on her mobile.

Yes . . . Tomorrow, that's right. Well, thank you for confirming. What time's check-in? Any time after eleven? That's fine.

Damn, she tells herself sometime later. *I forgot to buy the bread.*

I hear myself arriving back from work, and removing the recorder from its drawer.

And then all I hear is silence, taking place in real time.

In the morning, before she's up, I take her mobile from her coat pocket, and jot a number down from Call Register. When I ring it from my own phone, a hotel receptionist answers. I find I can't speak.

Emma emerges, in her dressing gown. "I'm going to London today, too," she says. "But I'll go in on the ten o'clock."

"Shall we come back together?" My voice is rusty, as if it belongs to somebody older.

"Oh, I'll be home before rush hour." She kisses me on the cheek.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'll leave the rough stuff to you men."

On the train, Maurice complains about the continuing rain. He also complains about fare increases, the government's pensions policy, and the number of reality shows on TV.

"Don't those guys know their T.S. Eliot?" *Those guys* are the guys we all hate: the ones responsible for whatever disgusts us at that moment. " 'Humankind cannot bear too much reality.' Did they think he was kidding, or what?"

"I don't think modernist poetry factors in much in TV scheduling, Maurice."

"Well, I don't think basic intelligence factors in much in TV scheduling. They got freaking cheerleaders doing the weather, for God's sake." He pauses. "Actually, that bit's not all bad."

On the concourse he says, "Let's be careful out there."

"Do it to them before they do it to you," I tell him.

But I don't head for the Tube. Instead I make for the daylight, or what little there is of it—it's wet and grey as I walk to Hyde Park Corner, where I buy a cup of coffee in a franchise opposite Victoria's Hotel, and use my mobile to call in sick. There's a newspaper on my table, and I pretend to read while I watch the comings and goings.

At ten to eleven a shaven-headed man with an earring pauses at its steps, checks his watch, then goes in.

At ten past, my wife arrives in a taxi. She smiles as she tips the driver.

Stay detached. Remain in control. Let go of the space around you.

But everything inside that space is yours.

I spend so long in that cafe, it starts to feel like my kitchen. I drink so much coffee, I start to feel like hell.

In the newspaper I'm not reading is a grainy picture from CCTV footage. It shows two kids in hoodies stomping a homeless man to death.

Three hours later, Emma leaves the Victoria. Through a circle I've rubbed in the steamed-up window I watch as she sets off for the station, and she looks the same to me as she always does. There's no scarlet letter branded on her forehead. She might have been taking a business meeting in the hotel's conference room. Out of view she walks, her good grey coat and umbrella keeping her dry. Once she's gone, I return my attention to the hotel entrance. It swims a little, but I blink away newfound knowledge. When the shaven-headed man emerges five minutes later, my vision is clear again, my purpose undimmed. I pay the bill and follow him round the corner. I'm half an escalator behind him as he dips into the underground.

The Tube map has been played with many times; its stations replaced with constellations, philosophers, authors, famous

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drunks. It is an attempt, I think, to find poetry in the ordinary. He changes trains, then, at the Great Bear, and I loiter yards from him as he waits on the platform. Every so often he checks his watch. Perhaps he's heading back to work—playtime over; alibi used up. I wonder what excuse he phoned in before heading for the Victoria: a dental appointment? A checkup? He is wearing a suit beneath his raincoat, and his earring flashes when it catches the light. I imagine him in the passenger seat of my wife's red car, his hand up her skirt; or in a hotel bedroom, that suit folded onto a hanger before their fun begins. Then the Tube arrives in a silvery whoosh, and we board the same carriage, and sit ten seats apart.

Dylan Thomas; W.B. Yeats; Ezra Pound . . . The carriage fills, but no one sits next to me. Perhaps I'm giving off the wrong signals. Perhaps no one wants to check if I'm dead. I feel dead, it's almost true, as we reach our destination and emerge into the same grey, grubby weather of twenty minutes ago. He walks across Hungerford Bridge, collar pulled up to protect his shaven skull. I follow some way behind. My hair is plastered to my head, and rainwater pours down my neck. Everyone I pass has the same expression stamped onto their features: a look that says *stay out of my space.* On the South Bank he veers left, and heads towards Tate Modern. Before reaching it he turns from the river, and without ever looking behind him—as if he enjoys a clear conscience—leads me to an office block, into which he disappears.

Forever, I wait in an alley opposite. Ages of unrecorded time, whose silence spools into nothingness.

When he emerges, it's long past office hours. Perhaps he's compensating for his morning's absence, or perhaps his office role is important enough to spill into the evening shift. He seems tired when he appears at last, talking into his mobile phone; shaking his head and waving his free hand around in a pointless underlining of his words. This conversation lasts way up the South Bank, where he stops at last at a pub beyond the Globe.

From a corner table I watch as he drinks his way through three large scotches.

Outside, it is full-on dark. The rain is back with a vengeance, and has cleared the evening streets. I nurse a single pint until he rises to leave, then follow him along the unwatched river, heedless of the switched-off cameras we pass. He is somewhat drunk, I expect. I'm mildly wobbly myself, after beer on an empty stomach.

What happens next—the sudden acceleration, the blow to the head, the heave into the water—seems both familiar and surprisingly straightforward. For a minute afterwards I stand there, hardly able to believe that such a large problem can vanish so instantly. In the morning, I expect, it will feel like another strange dream.

And then I catch the last train home, to find Emma waiting, anxious.

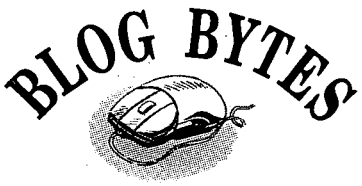
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You're so late!"
"I went for a drink. Sorry."
"You could have called."
"I know. I'm sorry."
"Are you sure you're all right?"
"I'm fine," I say. "How was your day?"
"Same old, same old," she tells me.

The papers make great play of the irony: The murder of the London head of a global security outfit captured on his firm's CCTV. There are shots of me trailing him halfway up the river. Even I recognise myself in the blown-up footage. But at the trial I don't mention Maurice's subterfuge about the system being shut down because—as both he and Emma point out—last thing I need is another drowned body surfacing. Even a twenty-year-old murder would muddy the waters. One life sentence is enough.

They send me a photo from the wedding. This takes place the week after our divorce comes through. Maurice looks fit and spruce, but then he has no further need to play down-at-heel, and the extra £15K for stepping into the boss's shoes can't hurt. He's maintained his predecessor's habit of holding brunch meetings at the Victoria, I gather. Its conference room is ideal. I sometimes think about Emma killing three hours in the cafe there, and wonder if she drank as much coffee as I did while waiting for suspicion to harden.

In the photo, she looks beautiful.●



by Bill Crider

The idea of the "group blog" seems to be catching on lately. Instead of one writer doing all the posts, writers band together to share the load. A fine example, and one that should be of particular interest to readers of this magazine, is Criminal Brief (http://www.criminalbrief.com/), which is a blog devoted to discussion of the writing and marketing of short stories. Saturdays are devoted to a "Mystery Masterclass" with "distinguished guest contributors," the first of whom was Ed Hoch. It would be hard to find anyone who knows more about the short story than Ed. Regular contributors are James Lincoln Warren (on Monday), Melodie Johnson Howe (Tuesday), Robert Lopresti (Wednesday), Deborah Elliott-Upton (Thursday), Steven Steinbock (Friday), and Leigh Lundin (Sunday). **(continued on p. 162)**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A Rat's Tale

by Donna Andrews

I had a bad feeling when the doorbell rang. Of course, I never like hearing the doorbell. I'd known for a while that someone could file a complaint with social services or the health department at any time. As soon as they stepped through the door, the game would be up. The old man would be off to some home and I'd be out in the cold.

And I kind of like the old man. Maybe I should resent him for killing off the rest of my family, but that was a long time ago. And he's mellowed since. It's been ages since he put down any poison. Could be he's realized I know better than to eat it, but I think these days he enjoys the company. He still mutters "Goddamned rats!" whenever he sees me, but there's no venom in it anymore.

So when the doorbell rang, I scuttled over to the door and got there before he did. He has to follow the paths, and I can run along the top of the magazines, in the places where they don't quite reach the ceiling or where I've gnawed tunnels through them.

By the time he reached the door, I was already perched in one of my observation points—a nice, comfortable nest I'd hollowed out in the old *National Geographic*s that flanked the door, with a couple of convenient peepholes.

"Who's there?" the old man said.

"It's Ron."

I flattened my ears at that—Ron, the old man's nephew, worried me. So far he hadn't tried to get the old man to move out or clean up, but I figure that was because he was afraid it would end up costing him money.

The old man opened the door.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"It's freezing out here," Ron said. "Can't we talk inside?"

Agatha Award-winner Donna Andrews is the author of two mystery series, one published by Berkley, featuring an artificial intelligence as the sleuth, and the other from St. Martin's Press, featuring amateur sleuth Meg Langslow. The latest in that series is *The Penguin Who Knew Too Much*. "A Rat's Tale" was inspired, says Ms. Andrews, by the fact that she herself is a packrat.

©2007 by Donna Andrews

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The old man stared at him for a few moments, then pushed the door partway closed, to give himself room to turn around, and began shuffling back down the path. Ron pushed the door open again and slipped in. He stood in the hall taking shallow breaths for a few seconds, the way he always did. Humans never really seemed to appreciate the rich, nuanced collection of odors the old man had created here in the house. Even the old man probably didn't really appreciate it—he'd just stopped noticing.

I hoped Ron would puke, like last time, but he fought it back. He closed the door and followed the old man down the path.

I scrambled to follow. I had to go more slowly than usual. The old man couldn't hear the rustling noises I made while crawling over and through all the newspapers and magazines, but Ron's ears were keener. And despite my caution, he must have heard me.

"I still say you've got rats," he was saying as I arrived at my observation post in the kitchen.

"No, I don't," the old man said. "And if I did, they'd be my rats, and none of your business."

The old man sat down in his usual place—a little cave hollowed out between the stacks of *Reader's Digests* and flattened cardboard boxes around the kitchen table.

Ron looked around, confirmed that there wasn't anywhere else to sit—just as there hadn't been the last dozen times he'd been here. He leaned against the kitchen counter, careful not to touch any of the junk precariously piled there.

"What do you want?" the old man asked.

"Doesn't it ever occur to you that maybe it's a good thing to have someone check on you every once in a while?" Ron said. "What if some of this junk fell on you? You could die before anyone found you."

"I'd still die before you lifted a finger to help me. What do you want?"

"I need some money," the nephew said.

"Tough luck."

"I've got people after me!" Ron was sweating slightly, and the room still had its usual frigid winter chill. "If I can't make my interest payments—"

"Tough luck," the old man repeated. "I don't have any money, and if I did, I wouldn't give it to you."

Not the first time they'd had this argument. Usually, it went on until Ron lost his temper and stormed off, calling the old man names over his shoulder. I'd have found it annoying, but I'd noticed that the old man seemed quite cheerful for a day or so after their arguments.

This time, Ron gave up almost immediately.

"You damned useless old miser," he said.

The old man gave a couple of wheezy chuckles and then went back to the Cheerios he'd been eating for lunch when Ron arrived.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Shut the door on your way out," he said, between spoonfuls.

Ron was staring at the old man's mouth as if it fascinated him, watching the jaws work and then the Adam's apple bobbing when he swallowed.

"Useless," he muttered.

He stood up and took a step toward the kitchen doorway. I felt relieved.

Then he reached over and took something off one of the mountains of junk. A rolling pin. A few things slid off the pile—some plastic butter tubs and some folded brown-paper shopping bags. The old man glanced up. He didn't see the rolling pin—Ron hid it behind his body, and stood looking up at the junk, as if waiting until things stopped falling to take the path back to the front door. Once the danger of an avalanche had passed, the old man focused back on his Cheerios.

Ron turned around and whacked him on the head with the rolling pin. The old man's head went down on the table, and the bowl of cereal tipped onto the floor.

Ron stood there looking at the old man for a few seconds. Then he reached out and grabbed a rag off one of the piles and wiped the end of the rolling pin he'd been holding. He threw the rolling pin down at the old man's feet and the rag back with the rest of the junk. He grabbed a broom and poked at the junk around the old man until he brought enough stuff crashing down to almost hide him.

"Useless old miser," he said.

For the next hour or so, he ransacked the house. He started by checking the places the old man used regularly—the kitchen drawers that would still open. The freezer. The medicine cabinet in the one usable bathroom. The area around and under the old man's bed. I alternated between keeping an eye on him and checking on the old man, who wasn't quite dead yet. He was still breathing, and occasionally he'd mutter for help.

After Ron ran out of easy places to look, he tried tearing into a few of the piles of junk, but he had to give that up rather soon, since there was no place to put the stuff he pulled out.

"I'll show you, you miserable packrat," he muttered.

He went back to the kitchen and pulled things off the pile until he could reach the old man's pocket and take out the house keys.

"Help me," the old man muttered. I couldn't tell if Ron heard. He just piled some of the junk back on top of the old man and left.

Once I was sure he was gone, I got to work. I ransacked the kitchen for food, dragging everything I found down into my tunnels in the walls or beneath the crawl space. I figured I'd have to move eventually once the old man was gone, but the more food I could scavenge, the longer I could put that off.

The old man finally died around nightfall. As I scuttled around his cooling body, I realized that even though he was, technically, also food, I was curiously disinclined to do anything about it. True,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he was thin, and would probably be fairly tough and stringy, but I'd eaten worse. Maybe it was sentimental of me—the old rat and the old packrat who'd lived so long together becoming friends, or some such nonsense. More probably a good instinct—after all, if whoever found the old man saw rat bites on him, they might go into high gear with an extermination program before I had a chance to relocate.

It was near midnight when I heard a key in the door. I crept to an observation point.

Ron again. He came in with two big boxes of black trash bags. He opened one box, pulled out a bag, and walked through the trails for a few minutes, as if he couldn't decide where to start. Then he settled on the old man's bedroom. He began picking up stuff, looking through it, and stuffing it into the trash bag.

Slow work. At this rate, it might take him almost as long to empty the house as it had for the old man to fill it. Decades. I had a feeling he'd give up long before he even made a dent in the junk.

And then I had an idea. I checked out all my observation points, and studied the nearby junk. I found a few places where I thought I could start a landslide if I pushed, pulled, or gnawed the right thing.

I started with the front door. I had to do a bit of gnawing at the base of the stacks, out in the open, but I timed my forays for right after Ron had returned from taking a bag outside to his car. After his fifth trip outside, I waited till he was back up in the bedroom and set off my booby trap.

A year's worth of the *Washington Post* came crashing down in front of the front door. I leaped across the path to the other side, and by the time Ron came clumping down to investigate, I'd added a decade's worth of *National Geographic*s to the pile.

"What the—" Ron exclaimed. Then he shook his head. He went back to the bedroom and returned with one of the boxes of black plastic bags.

When he got to the foot of the stairs, I set off my third avalanche. That kept him stunned for long enough for me to dump two more piles of junk on him. By this time, the path through the front hall had all but disappeared. It was just a disorganized heap of books, magazines, and junk, with Ron squirming feebly at the bottom.

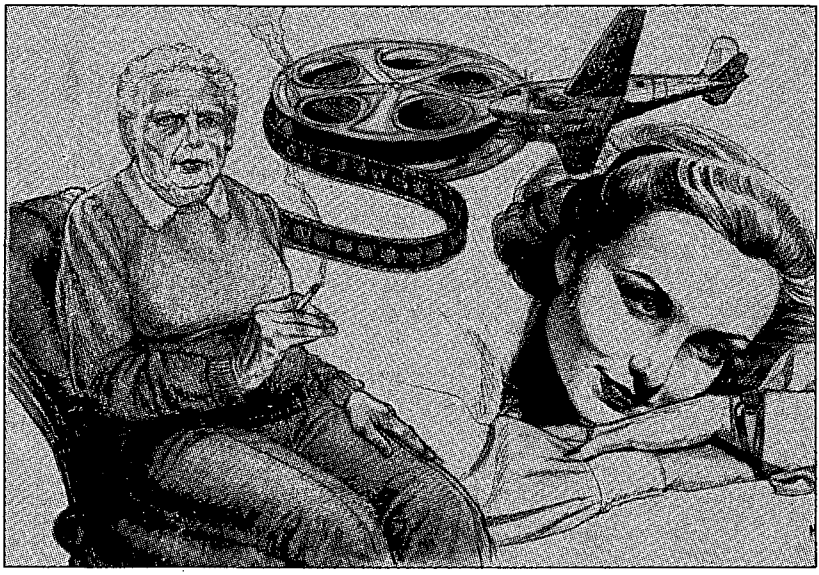
"Help me," he kept whispering. "I can't move. Somebody help me."

I went back to the kitchen and snuffled around the old man's feet for the last couple of Cheerios. I sniffed his sad, naked ankles, but he continued to be absolutely unappetizing. Curious.

Ron, on the other hand, was fat and sleek and quite tempting. As soon as he was dead—

Though that could take a while—why should I wait? I decided I'd go and see if he was telling the truth about not being able to move. And if he was, I planned on making sure his last few hours—or days—were far less enjoyable than the old man's.●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Laurie Harden

The Profane Angel

by Loren D. Estleman

Pegasus made his majestic way down the San Diego Freeway, waiting with wings partially folded through the relatively steady stop-and-go before the morning crush and the noon rush; took brief flight on Sunset Boulevard; and settled down to wait through the standard three light changes at each intersection in West Hollywood.

The sight of the mythical beast, painstakingly worked in plaster and spray-painted all the colors of the Day-Glo rainbow, drew no more than the occasional curious glance toward its perch on the open rented trailer. L.A. had seen stranger sights on an almost daily basis.

Nevertheless, Valentino was relieved when he pulled into the alley next to the Oracle Theater and found Kyle Broadhead waiting with a pair of husky undergraduates to help him unload the sculpture. He disliked attracting attention, and had chosen the one place in America to live where it was virtually impossible.

Broadhead wrinkled his nose at the garish paint job. "What a hideous way to treat a noble creature that never existed. Where'd you find him, Fire Island?"

©2007 by Loren D. Estleman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Close." Valentino got out of the car and stretched. "An Armenian rug dealer in the Valley stuck it in front of his shop to attract business. Some students from State have been redecorating it once or twice a week for five years. It'll take ten gallons of mineral spirits just to get down to the original workmanship."

One of the burly UCLA students snorted. "Everybody knows you can't trust a Statie with a box of Crayolas."

"Spoken by the young man who credited *Stagecoach* to Henry Ford on his midterm." Broadhead, rumpled and dusted with pipe ash, patted Pegasus on the flank. "Welcome home, Old Paint. Your brother's missed you."

Loren D. Estleman's film detective, Valentino, first saw print in the pages of *EQMM* and has been an *EQMM* exclusive ever since. That's about to change: The first novel in the series, *Framed*, is expected from Forge this autumn. The following tale showcases Carole Lombard, as Valentino tries to determine the legitimacy of an old woman's claim about the supposedly long-dead film star. †

Valentino untied the ropes that lashed the statue in place, the students bent their shoulders to their task, and after much grunting, mutual accusations of sloth, and two pinched fingers, the winged horse stood at last on a pedestal opposite its twin at the base of the grand staircase in the littered lobby.

"There's teamwork." Broadhead admired the tableau.

Valentino said, "What's that make you, the coach? I missed your contribution."

The professor took his pipe out of his mouth. "Do you realize how much concentration it takes to keep one of these going?"

The student who had suffered the casualty stopped sucking his fingers. "The new one's bigger."

"It won't be when we strip off all those coats of paint," Valentino said. "It isn't any newer than the other one. They were sculpted at the same time by the same artist. If I hadn't tracked this one down by way of the Internet, duplicating it would have cost me a fortune."

"As opposed to the several you've already sunk into this dump." Broadhead nursed his pipe.

"A man has to have a hobby."

"Movies are only a hobby when your work hasn't anything to do with them. You spend all week procuring and restoring old films and all weekend rebuilding a theater to show them in. Which reminds me. Someone called while you were out riding and roping." Broadhead unpocketed a foil-lined wrapper that had con-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tained tobacco and handed it to Valentino.

"What's it say?" He couldn't read what was scribbled on it.

"An old lady in Century City says she has something to sell. Probably a home movie of her playing jacks at Valley Forge. I told you that interview you gave the *Times* would draw more pests than genuine leads."

Valentino went up to the bachelor quarters he'd established in the projection booth and dialed a number off Caller ID. He couldn't distinguish letters from numerals in Broadhead's scrawl. A young woman told him he'd reached the residence of Jane Peters. He got as far as his name when she interrupted.

"Yes, Miss Peters is expecting your call. She's resting at the moment. Are you free to come to the apartment later today? She has a property she thinks might interest you."

"May I ask what it is?"

"A movie called *A Perfect Crime.*"

"The title's kind of generic. Can you give me any details?"

Paper rustled. "It's a silent, released in nineteen twenty-one. The director's name is Dwan." She spelled it.

"*Allan* Dwan?"

"Yes, that's the name."

He steadied his voice. "What's the address?"

Broadhead was alone when he returned to the lobby. "You owe me twenty apiece for the grunts," the professor said. "I offered them extra credit instead, but any dolt can pass a film class."

"Here's fifty. I'm feeling generous."

"What's the old lady got, *The Magnificent Ambersons* uncut?"

"Almost as good. Carole Lombard's first film."

He dropped off the trailer at the rental agency and day-dreamed his way across town. Carole Lombard, the slender, dazzling blond queen of screwball romantic comedy, had made an insignificant debut at age twelve, then blazed across the screen in the 1930s, reaching her peak of fame when she married Clark Gable, the King of Hollywood. Stories of her bawdy sense of humor and outrageous practical jokes were legend, and by all accounts the couple was deliriously happy. But it all ended tragically in early 1942, when the plane carrying Lombard home from a war-bond rally slammed into a mountain thirty miles from Las Vegas. She was thirty-three years old.

Valentino hadn't had cause to revisit Century City since he'd moved out of a high-rise to take up residency in the Oracle, where he awoke in the morning to the zing and chatter of the renovators' power saws and nail guns and went to bed in the evening past walls where there had been empty spaces and empty spaces where there had been walls only hours before. But in Jane Peters' building he congratulated himself on the move: A brat hit every button

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on his way out of the elevator, sentencing its only remaining occupant to stopping at every floor.

"Mr. Valentino? I'm Gloria Voss, Miss Peters' health-care provider. We spoke on the phone."

He shook the hand of the tall, slim brunette in a white blouse, pressed jeans, and new running shoes. The living room was clean, spacious, and decorated tastefully in shades of gray and slate blue, but smelled of many generations of cigarettes under a thin layer of air freshener.

His nose must have twitched, because she said, "She tries to fool me by flushing the butts down the toilet, but the place always smells like a smoking car. I think she bribes the nasty kid downstairs to smuggle them in. He probably shoplifts them."

"I might have met him."

"That explains why you're late. Some day he's going to try that button trick on Miss Peters and get a tongue-lashing to make him wish she'd used a paddle. She has an impressive vocabulary."

"No wonder she likes Carole Lombard. They say she had her brothers teach her every curse word they knew, to put her on level ground with every man she dealt with. They called her the Profane Angel."

"Jane told me that; and many other stories as well. I'll have to rent a Lombard film sometime. Anyone whose escapades can make a trained nurse blush is worth checking out."

"You haven't seen *A Perfect Crime*?" He had a sinking feeling he'd been lured there under false pretenses.

"No projection equipment here. But she tells me I'm not missing much. 'Child actors should be drowned, like kittens.' That's a quote."

She excused herself to knock on a door across from the entrance. "Mr. Valentino's here." After a muffled invitation she opened the door and held it for him. As he stepped past, she lowered her voice. "Find out where she hides the cigarettes."

When the door closed behind him, he was in a large bedroom done in white and gold. There was a white four-poster bed, neatly made, a dresser and vanity table, and a sitting area made up of two reproduction Louis XIV chairs and a chaise, all upholstered in Cloth of Gold. Plastic prescription containers and over-the-counter pill bottles took up every horizontal space except one: Valentino's practiced eye went immediately to four flat aluminum film cans stacked on the vanity table.

"You look like a Valentino. Family resemblance, or plastic surgery?"

The tobacco-roughened voice came from a very old, very plump woman seated in one of the chairs. She wore a red sweater that made her look like a tomato, blue sweatpants with sharp creases, and thick socks in heelless slippers. Her hair was shorn to a white

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

haze on her scalp. She had blue eyes.

"Neither," Valentino said. "There might be some relation way back; not enough to inherit."

"He didn't have much to leave. His career was on the skids when he died at thirty-one. 'Good career move,' someone said. It was the same with Lombard. She hadn't made a movie worth shouting about in years when that plane cracked up. She was mostly famous as Mrs. Clark Gable."

"So much for breaking the ice."

"I'm ninety-eight. I can't wait for it to melt on its own. Sit down."

As he lowered himself into the chair facing hers, she took the top off a fat pill bottle and drew out a filterless cigarette. A smaller container yielded a slim throwaway lighter. "If you tell Field Marshal von Voss about my stash, the deal's off." She blew twin jets of smoke out her nostrils.

"Trying to keep you healthy doesn't make her a Nazi."

"I gave up two breasts for the privilege years ago. Fortunately, they weren't much to begin with. It was practically out-patient surgery."

He laughed, more in response to the wicked gleam in her eye than to the black humor. His work put him in frequent contact with senior citizens, veterans of the Golden Age, and he found them more entertaining company than most of his own generation. "How did you come into possession of *A Perfect Crime*?"

"It was no feat. They hadn't invented re-releasing back then, no TV or video markets, so no one gave them any thought after the first run. But you know that. If the studios had kept better track of the inventory, we'd be up to our butts in celluloid and you'd be out of a job."

"Were you in the industry?"

"I came out here when I was eight years old. It wasn't an industry then. But it was the only factory in town, and if you wanted to work, that's where you went."

He excused himself and got up to look at the film cans. *A Perfect Crime* was stenciled on the lid of the one on top, with the year and production number. It looked genuine, but he'd been fooled before. "Silver nitrate?"

"No. I had it transferred to safety stock before you were born. I burned the original negative before it burned me. That stuff's worse than nitroglycerine."

"Were you a technician?"

"I could've joined the union if I'd wanted. I always got on with all my crews. They like to talk about their work, like everyone else."

He went back and sat down. Time had done its work on her face and figure, but essential beauty leaves a glowing memory, stubborn as embers clustered here and there. "Were you an actress?"

She laughed, coughing smoke, and deposited the smoldering stub in a water glass. It spat and died in the inch of liquid in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bottom. "The critics didn't all agree on that. I used to be Carole Lombard."

He was silent long enough for her to fish out a fresh cancer stick and set fire to it.

"Jane Peters," he said. "Lombard's real name was Jane Alice Peters. I didn't make the connection."

"I was still fooling with it until I was almost thirty, when I made it legal. I was Carol without the *e* until *Fast and Loose*; my twenty-eighth, for hell's sake, counting the Sennett shorts. Spelling mistake in the credits. That *e* made me a star."

He almost said, *It wasn't that that made you a star,* then remembered she was a fraud or delusional. "Lombard's been dead more than sixty years. Even you said so."

"I said her plane cracked up. I didn't say she was in it. I mean *I.* I've been talking about myself in the third person so long I sometimes get to thinking I'm somebody else."

"Her remains were found on the scene, along with the pilot and all the other passengers. One of them was her mother."

"I never got over that." She used the little finger of the hand holding the cigarette to sop a tear from the corner of one eye. "She was my buddy. Pa was nuts about her. Gable, I mean. We called each other Ma and Pa, not Carole and Clark. Sounds like an advertising agency." She took a long, shuddering drag and seemed to collect herself. "They found some wisps of blond hair and a mass of pulp in a section of fuselage squashed into a block ten feet long. It wasn't me. I gave up my seat to an army nurse when we landed in Albuquerque to refuel. I told Mom to stay aboard and tell Pa I'd be along later by train. I said it was my patriotic duty, but what I really wanted was to drive him so batty he'd take me right there in the station. We were always pulling pranks like that on each other."

Valentino said nothing. He'd encountered cases of Alzheimer's and senile dementia often enough to know better than to upset the afflicted party by contradicting her.

"I scrubbed off my makeup and tied a scarf around my hair before I boarded the train in Albuquerque," she said. "I was tired of signing autographs and grinning at fans. I found out about the crash when we stopped in Flagstaff, where the newsboys were shouting. 'Carole Lombard Dead,' that knocked all the tired out of me. I got out and bought a paper. I didn't make it through the first paragraph before I fainted.

"I woke up in a doctor's office. He told me I was pregnant."

"Clark Gable's child." He couldn't keep the cynicism out of his tone.

She nodded. "In the course of thirty minutes I learned I was an orphan, I was responsible for an innocent young woman's death, and that I was going to be a mother. It starts you thinking." She smiled crookedly. He wondered if she'd rehearsed the expression

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in front of a mirror with Lombard's picture taped to it. "'Madcap.' 'Screwball.' Those were the words that came up most often when people talked or wrote about me. Not much of a legacy to leave your kid with. I was getting a little long in the tooth to get away with the reputation much longer before it became pathetic. The public already sensed it, and had stopped going to see my pictures. A star fades quickly under those circumstances; neither the doctor nor the people who carried me to his office nor his nurse recognized me. So what was I working so hard for?"

"You're forgetting Gable. He grieved the rest of his life."

"When I heard he'd volunteered to serve as a tailgunner in the air force, I almost came forward," she said. "It was a suicide's cry for help. But then I realized MGM would protect him if it meant bribing Hitler to send the Luftwaffe in the other direction. And later, when he remarried, he seemed happy. I kept up with him through the trades and film magazines right up until he died. I cried that day, too. But, you see, I didn't love him."

Anger flared. He tamped it down through an effort of will. "Gable and Lombard is Hollywood's greatest love story. Greater than Bogie and Betty. Greater than Pickford and Fairbanks and Garbo and Gilbert and all the rest."

"You're overlooking the fact that Garbo left Gilbert at the altar. That Pickford and Fairbanks broke up. That Bogie may have cheated on Betty and vice versa. The rest is PR. You've been around this town long enough not to judge by appearances. Russ Columbo was the love of my life."

"The bandleader. He and Lombard were seeing each other when he was killed in a hunting accident."

"For a long time after that, I expected to die any minute of a broken heart. Well, I didn't and I knew Pa wouldn't either. Deep down, under the public show of tragedy, I think he knew we couldn't have lasted. He'd been through divorce; me too, and it stinks. Drives a wedge right down through the center of your fan base. But everyone gathers around a handsome widower.

"Meanwhile," she continued, "I had someone new to love, a beautiful daughter. I raised her in Buffalo, New York, which is as far as you can get from Hollywood culture without going Amish. She died four years ago of leukemia, still thinking her father was the man I married, the owner of a fleet of Great Lakes ore carriers." She flicked away another tear, leaving a smudge of ash on her temple. "By then he was dead, too, so I moved back here, away from the Buffalo winters. The old bastard left me loaded. I never did take his name."

"Why are you telling me all this now?"

She was busy lighting a fresh cigarette from the butt of the last. She dropped the remnant among the others floating in the water glass. "I keep thinking about that poor girl, that army nurse who took my place on the plane. There's a family somewhere that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

doesn't know if she was murdered or ran away or if she is lying at the bottom of a well. They can identify people now by DNA. If they exhume the body interred under my name in Forest Lawn and run tests, maybe someone can be notified, even if it's a grandnephew who wasn't even born at the time of the crash. What's that word? Closure? Everyone deserves that."

"Are you telling me the film's a dummy, just to get me to listen to your story?"

"Of course not. It's the McCoy. I'll even let you take a reel with you to screen. Reel three, to guarantee you won't just run off with it. No one wants to come into a picture in the middle."

"But why now? Why not years ago, when there was a better chance some of the dead woman's immediate family was still around to hear the news?"

"Well, that's not the only reason." She blew smoke at the ceiling, tipping her head back the way actresses used to do in glamour shots to show the smooth line of a throat. Hers was festooned with loose skin. "It's part of the price for donating that turkey to UCLA. I want you to tell the world my story. You can use the campaign to promote the film as a vehicle. 'Lombard Lives!' Boffo box office."

He leaned forward, choosing his words carefully. If she wasn't just posing, his pointing out the basic inconsistency in her story could arouse paranoia and possibly violence. "I don't understand. I thought the whole point of your not coming forward was to put all that behind you."

"It was. But I miss it. I miss the fame, God help me. Gable's gone, Bogie's gone, Jimmy and Kate and Spence and Bette. At the end they were dropping like leaves, from one Oscar telecast to the next. I'm the only name-above-the-title star left from the glory days. The last dinosaur. I want to feel flashbulbs bursting in my face one more time, put my dainty foot on the red carpet, wave at whoever knows who the hell I am sitting in the bleachers on the sidewalk. Stick my hands and feet in the cement at Grauman's. I never got to do that."

"That's your price? Fifteen minutes more in the spotlight?"

She flashed that crooked smile. "Time is relative. Gloria will tell you I haven't much longer than that."

"I can't promise anything without proof. Will you submit to a DNA test?"

"Absolutely not. Even if you can find some shirttail blood relative to provide a match, I won't open my mouth for some joker to swab around inside it. How do I know they won't clone me after I'm gone? There's only one of me; that's the selling point." She extinguished another butt. "I want to be Carole Lombard again. Who wouldn't?"

He and Kyle Broadhead screened the silent reel in the projection room where the professor showed films to his students. They sat

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at kidney-shaped writing tables and watched the pubescent star-to-be pretending to be Monte Blue's kid sister. She was unconvincing, even in pantomime. "Howard Hawks said she couldn't act," Broadhead said. "Getting the performance he got out of her in *Twentieth Century* proves just how great a director he was."

Valentino said, "John Barrymore told her she was the best he ever worked with. She claimed she learned more from him on that shoot than she did during her previous twelve years in pictures."

"What are you going to tell the old lady?"

"I owe her a look-see into her story just for this. Do you know anyone who could check and see if any army nurses vanished around the time of the crash?"

"If I knew my way around the Net as well as the worst of my students, I could hack into the Bank of America and finance the whole preservation program. I'll ask one. Don't tell me you're buying into this fairy tale."

"Give me a break. People who are supposed to be dead are rumored to be still alive every day, and none of them has come out of hiding yet."

"If you try trotting her out like Princess Anastasia, when it blows up in your face the scandal will do more harm to the program than if this piece of tripe stayed buried."

"I know."

"The smart thing to do is to return the reel and call it off."

"I know."

Broadhead blew through his pipe. He never lit it in a room that contained film. "So how far do you think you can string her along?"

"What makes you think I won't do the smart thing and forget all about it?"

"Ten years of daily association. Every loose frame left unaccounted for is an orphan. You'd adopt them all even if it ended in disgrace for you and the institution that keeps us off food stamps."

Valentino patted his friend's knee and stood. "Put your whiz kid to work."

Star vehicles are like peanuts, and twenty minutes of *A Perfect Crime* created a hunger that demanded satisfaction. Valentino checked out *Twentieth Century, My Man Godfrey,* and *No Man of Her Own*—her only appearance on film with Clark Gable—from the university library and watched them back-to-back at the Oracle, using the rebuilt Bell & Howell projector and state-of-the-art composition screen that had set him back two mortgage payments. He had them all on tape and disc, but preferred to watch the classics the same way they were seen back when stars still glittered like gifts from the Milky Way and ushers prowled the aisles ready to expel any atheists who wouldn't stop talking during the feature.

There in the dark he fell in love all over again with the incendi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ary blonde who had won the heart of America's Rhett Butler and hundreds of thousands of moviegoers in New York and San Francisco, Terre Haute and Cincinnati. He had always found her unsympathetic in *Century,* and so had most of middle America during its first run, but now he appreciated the breezy skill with which she met every challenge from John Barrymore, the prince of players. Her ditzy debutante in *Godfrey* charmed him as it had William Powell, who despite their real-life divorce had insisted upon casting her opposite his socialite-turned-tramp-turned-butler (and netting her an Academy Award nomination), and although little of the chemistry between her and Gable showed in *No Man,* it comforted Valentino to see them together again, in a medium where no catastrophe, natural or man-made, could separate them. From her golden hair to her shimmering gowns she glowed, and there was more erotic tension in the arch of her brow and the hollow of her cheek than in the most explicit NC-17 ever shot.

Gable had known that. Valentino rejected out of hand the notion that the spark between them had been just another invention of the flacks in the MGM publicity department. What if all the legends were fake? If someone else had been at the wheel of James Dean's wrecked Porsche? If Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn had secretly loathed each other? If a stunt double had hung off the high clock in Harold Lloyd's place? An industry without a healthy mythos might as well churn out bottle caps.

When the last frame flapped through the gate he rewound the final reel and retired to bed and his Deco dreams.

"Well?"

Two days had passed since their conference in the projection room. Broadhead had entered Valentino's memorabilia-cluttered office in his usual fashion, without knocking, swept a stack of French film journals off a chair, and sat scraping out the bowl of his pipe with a Tom Mix penknife he found on the desk.

"Edith Jenkins," he said.

"What about her, whoever she is?"

"Was. She enlisted as a nurse just after Pearl Harbor, to escape her abusive husband. When she'd been AWOL six weeks, the husband was arrested for questioning, but without a body or any other evidence he was released. The papers lost interest after a while, as they will when the story has no conclusion. She never turned up."

Valentino started to rise. "Then that means—"

"Don't get excited. This isn't a movie, where everything ties together just before the fade-out. She was a brunette. She wouldn't have left any blond hair in any broken airplane."

"She might've dyed it when she ran away from her husband. Lombard dyed hers."

"I'm not through."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Valentino sat.

"This kid's a freshman, but Bill Gates better watch his back. He dug up a dozen unexplained disappearances involving young women within two weeks of the accident. Two showed up alive later, three dead. No information on whether any of the others were in the army, although two were nurses, a vulnerable occupation then as now. One of them might have signed up under a nom de guerre. Point is the results are inconclusive."

"Huh."

"Eloquently put." Broadhead found high C on his stem.

"We could use that."

"*You* could. I'm a publish-or-perish academic. If I start endorsing Elvis and Bigfoot, this institution will retire me on my over-upholstered laurels and I'll wind up writing paperbacks about alien autopsies and weapons of mass destruction."

"Your liberal bias is showing."

"You're right. Scratch the alien autopsies. So what are you going to do?"

"There's always DNA."

"You said the old lady turned you down flat on that."

"She wouldn't have to take part. If we found a cousin or something of Lombard's—a 'shirttail blood relative,' as she put it—exhumed the body from Forest Lawn, and compared samples, we could either settle the question or make her claim credible."

"Even if you could do that, say you proved the corpse is Lombard's, which of course would be the result. She might destroy the other three reels of *A Perfect Crime* out of spite."

"Not if she relinquishes possession first. We could stall for time, go ahead with the publicity arrangements as promised. No one could expect us to follow through with them once she's exposed as a pretender."

Broadhead put away the pipe. "Where'd you tell me you were from originally?"

"A little town called Fox Forage, Indiana. I saw my first movie there in a stuffy little box made of concrete."

"I think you should go back there for a vacation. You've been out here so long you're beginning to think like a grifter."

Valentino sat back, deflated. "I didn't like it when I heard myself saying it."

"Don't feel bad. I said, 'Even if you could' get Lombard's body exhumed. You can't. You'd need that theoretical cousin's permission or a court order, which you won't get because there's no probable cause for a search, and then you'd have to pay for it. Digging corpses out of mausoleums is ten times more expensive than putting them in. *Then* you have to pay to put them back. UCLA won't foot the bill; we're lucky it keeps us in paper clips. How's your cash?"

"Ask my contractor. He's seen it more recently."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, there it is. You've got one reel of a film you can't exploit and a crazy old bat who thinks she's the Queen Mother of Hollywood."

"I liked her, though. If she isn't who she says she is, she oughta be."

Valentino was having a familiar dream. In it, he was standing on a thousand-foot cliff overlooking the ocean, arranging lemmings into an orderly herd to drive inland to safety. Suddenly a storm broke out. Thunder and lightning and lashing winds panicked the lemmings, who stampeded between his feet, dodging his grasping hands, and plunged over the edge of the cliff and down into the pitching waves, which swept them out to sea and out of sight.

He was grateful when the telephone woke him. The lemmings were a unique breed, black and glistening as the bits of film he gathered from both hemispheres to assemble and save from obscurity. Too often he failed just when success seemed at hand.

"I'm not getting any younger," said a cigarette-hoarse voice. "None of us is, but I'm moving faster than most. Do we have a deal or what?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Peters."

"I'm sorry, too, if 'Miss Peters' means what I think it means."

"It's just too risky without proof you're Carole Lombard. My reputation's one thing, but the preservation program's is another. A lot of important work has been destroyed in the past because someone failed to check his facts, deliberately or by accident."

"In other words, I'm a damn liar."

"There's just nothing to show the world you're telling the truth."

"What's *A Perfect Crime,* chopped liver?"

"The argument could be made that you don't have to have been in it to acquire a print. You said yourself the studios were careless in those days. You know a lot about Lombard, but she's been written about a lot. I'm sorry."

Silence crackled for what seemed a long time. "Well, people have been called phonies less politely. You know, you could have had what you wanted just by blowing smoke up my skirt until I kicked the bucket."

"I admit the idea was discussed, but I couldn't live with it. I'd have gotten a bad case of hives every time *Nothing Sacred* played on TCM."

"Bill Wellman directed that one at the top of his lungs. I waited until we wrapped, then got the crew to tie him up in a straitjacket." She exhaled, probably blowing smoke. "Toodle-oo, kiddo. Drop reel three by anytime." The line clicked and the dial tone came on.

Gloria Voss answered the door. She looked as trim and elegant as ever, but her eyes were red. "Jane passed early this morning, in her sleep."

"I'm sorry." He truly was, somewhat to his surprise. He gripped

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the film can he was holding so hard his fingers went numb.

The nurse excused herself and went into the bedroom. She came out carrying the rest of *A Perfect Crime* in a stack. "She asked me—told me—to give you these in case she missed you. 'Tell him to go to hell, and no hard feelings,' those were her words. It was the last thing she said before she went to sleep."

"But that wasn't the deal."

"I know. We had no secrets. She liked to come on as a tough old broad, but she had a heart as big as L.A. She ordered me not to see her films because they might corrupt me. Once, she said, she altered a contract with her agent so *he* owed *her* ten percent of everything he made instead of the other way around. He signed it without reading. She had him over a barrel, but she laughed and tore up the contract and had him draw up another."

"I've heard that story."

"I think she was testing you. Congratulations. You passed." She held out the stack of cans.

His cell phone rang. He apologized and answered. It was Kyle Broadhead. "Listen, my whiz kid found a great-grandniece of Lombard's in Fort Wayne, that's where Lombard was born. She's agreed to provide DNA samples."

"Kyle—"

"I'm not finished. I talked to Ted Turner's people. He'll finance an exhumation in return for distribution rights to *A Perfect Crime.* We've got the niece's permission, and Turner already owns everything Lombard did for MGM. He wants to put together a box set with her debut film included."

Valentino explained the situation.

"Doesn't change a thing," Broadhead said after a pause. "You can't buy publicity like this, but thank God Ted Turner can. People love a clever fake. The attention will bring in donations to the program like—like—"

"Lemmings," Valentino finished. "Tell Turner no deal."

"I heard some of that," Gloria Voss said, when he flipped shut the instrument. "It means you don't believe her, but it was a wonderful thing to do."

"I don't know what to believe. Whichever way it went, it would have spoiled a beautiful story."

"Grandma would say, 'Thanks, buster.'"

He reacted after a beat. "Grandma?"

"She's the one who talked me into becoming a nurse. She had a soft spot for them."

"So you're the granddaughter of—"

"Jane Peters and the owner of Buffalo Shipping. That's what it says on Mom's birth certificate." She thrust the cans into his arms, smiling with Carole Lombard's cheekbones and Clark Gable's mouth.●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LIMPOPO

by Sheila Kohler

Amy stares at the marks of the tires in the red dirt and the shiny bumper of the blue car, which glints in the light as it goes down the long driveway under the trees. It rained the night before and the earth is wet. She can hear the sound of the river running through the bottom of the garden in the distance. Always, there is the sound of the river running, even in her dreams. She likes to say the funny name over and over again: "Limpopo, Limpopo, Limpopo," she says. She wonders what the name means.

O. Henry Award-winner Sheila Kohler makes her *EQMM* debut this month in a painfully suspenseful tale set in her native South Africa. Her seven novels and three collections of short stories have brought her worldwide recognition and translation into many languages. Her most recent book is *Bluebird, or the Invention of Happiness* (Other Press, 2007).

Her mother has told her she is just going up to the farmers' co-op for a minute, she'll be as quick as she can, and Amy is to be a good girl now and mind the baby, who is sleeping like an angel, and the dogs, who are lying under the tree. From the swing, Amy watches the pale blue car go down the muddy driveway and out the gate. She swings back and forth through the blue air, going higher and higher. She stares at the tracks the way she does when her father takes her walking with him in the bush and they are looking for animal spoor. Her father is very good at spotting leopard tracks. There are still a few leopards in the hills, her father says, and he doesn't want them coming down and stealing his game.

Sometimes her father lets her walk with him, if she walks very quietly at his side and is careful to look for ticks in her socks on their return, when he goes out with the dogs looking for game to cull. Amy's father, Mark, runs a game farm on the border which he inherited from her grandparents before Independence. Amy is not quite sure what Independence is. All Amy knows is, her father gets up very early in the morning and leaves the house before anyone else is awake, and when he comes home at night, she is sometimes already asleep.

Amy swings through the air, throwing her head back and forth,

©2007 by Sheila Kohler

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and stretching out her legs. They look longer, and she feels taller, more grown up, watching the back of her mother's car disappear and the big garden that stretches away toward the river, which she can see glinting invitingly in the distance like a chocolate brown ribbon. Her mother has never left her alone with her baby brother before, though the co-op is not far from their house. In fact, she has never left her alone, even for a minute, even to go to fetch the eggs in the henhouse, which is right near the house.

But Amy is eight years old now, what her father calls the age of reason, the age when they shipped him off all on his own to boarding school, he says, and it is her father's birthday today. Her mother is making him his favourite cake, with granadillas and granadilla icing, and she has forgotten something she must have. Amy is old enough to remain with her brother for half an hour, surely, with the dogs to guard them, the two big ridgeback dogs they keep, called Dale and Tony, who are now asleep as the baby is, lying in the shade just outside the house under the seringa tree.

Gladys, the old nanny who works for them and helps her mother in the house, the one who brought her mother up, is too sick today to come in to work. She is lying in her small, smoky room, which is some way from the house. Amy's mother doesn't trust anyone else, these days, she says.

Her mother was in a hurry, and the baby was sleeping so soundly, which is such a rare thing; her brother is a colicky baby, her mother says, and anything wakes his lordship. He still wakes up in the night again and again and screams for her mother to come and pick him up and breast-feed him, which wakes Amy, too, sometimes, and makes her mother sleepy and cross during the day. Her mother stumbles around the house in her funny bra, her stained blouse half open, half-asleep. Her mother says she feels like a "zombie" half the time.

Today her mother had forgotten something she really needed for the special cake. Amy heard her say, "Oh dammit!" in the kitchen and slam a cupboard door shut and then step outside and look down at the sleeping baby. Then she looked up at Amy, who was swinging back and forth through the air in her light-blue sundress with the little sleeves like wings, her hair tied back from her face in a ponytail with her favourite blue bow. *Such a good girl, my good girl, my angel,* her mother often calls her.

Her mother told her to be an angel and hold the fort. She said if the baby should wake up, she could jiggle the pram a bit and he would probably go right back to sleep, she had just fed him, after all, or if that didn't work she could push the pram back and forth, but she was not to try to pick him up on her own. Amy is not allowed to hold her baby brother except when she sits with him on the sofa and rocks him very carefully in her arms with her mother beside her. Amy thinks this is stupid, as she is sure she can easily

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hold her little brother without dropping him to the floor, after all.

Amy likes having the whole house, the big garden with all its bright orange, yellow, and purple flowers, with the bees hovering over them, the two dogs, but above all her baby brother, all to herself. She pretends she is the mommy, now, of the new baby boy, and she is the owner of all this vast space. She feels she is the one who has brought it all forth: the baby, the big English pram with the mosquito netting falling down around her baby's face, and the big blond dogs, and even the river running in the distance. She has invented it all.

She gets down from the swing and struts around the garden in her Clark's sandals, pretending to be Mommy. She deadheads a few flowers the way Mommy does and pulls out a weed. She thinks it's probably a weed. She likes the way the cicadas scream again and again, like someone telling the same story over and over again. She likes the way the sun makes everything so very quiet and still at this hour of the morning before it gets too hot.

Amy's mother, too, likes the silence in the sunlit garden, the warmth of the early-morning air on her face, as she drives fast down the driveway in the car. She has not left the house on her own since the birth of the baby, six weeks ago. In fact, she has not had a moment on her own since the birth of her baby. The baby has been constantly, or so it seems to her, on her breast, sucking at her flesh. Insatiable, a big insatiable boy, who seems never to have enough milk and wakes up almost as soon as she puts him down. Since the birth of the baby, Amy, too, follows her wherever she goes, thumb in her mouth, watching her with her dark brown acquisitive eyes. She even follows her into the bathroom and keeps asking her every five minutes if she loves her. *Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?*

Amy was conceived so easily. Too easily, Stella thinks as she shifts gears. She remembers the awkward fumbling in the back of Mark's car in the dark. It was the first time they had made love; the first time she had made love, if that is what it could be called. When she realized she was pregnant, she couldn't believe it.

When she gave Mark the news, he said, "No problem, we'll get married. My parents will be only too happy to let us take over the farm." Neither of them was twenty years old yet. Stella left the university in Cape Town, where she was studying French, and they moved up north to Mark's parents' farm, near the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa. Stella finds the place very beautiful, and she likes to garden, but she sometimes suffers from the heat in the small house with its corrugated iron roof, and she misses her friends and family in Cape Town. Sometimes, when Mark comes back late at night, she finds the days long and lonely. After Amy's birth, she had moments of depression when she kept miscarrying repeatedly, and her mother came and stayed with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

them for a while. A psychiatrist prescribed pills. Finally, this beautiful new baby was conceived. And now, for Mark's birthday, the baby seems to be finally sleeping sweetly, soundly, replete.

Now she puts her sandaled foot on the accelerator, flying fast down the strip road, her tight skirt slipping up her thighs. She likes this comfortable elastic skirt which clings to her body, and which she wears with a blouse in the house. Unlike other women she knows, she was careful not to put on extra weight during her pregnancy. She is proud of her slim body, her long, lithe legs. She has got her figure back fast. She remembers being on holiday in Italy as a girl and someone calling out to her in the street: *"Che belle gambe!"*

With the window open, she feels the strong morning sun on her face, her legs. She turns on the radio and sings along with the old Beatles song that is playing: "Here Comes the Sun." She feels buoyant, light-headed, young. Her body no longer aches. She's a lucky young woman, she thinks, with her beautiful new baby boy—she had so wanted a boy, she is not sure why, but she did. She has a handsome, young, six-foot-two-tall husband who loves her and watches her as she moves around the kitchen in the morning and says, "You have the most beautiful legs in the world!"; and they have a huge game farm all to themselves. She has a bottle of Champagne in the refrigerator, and she decides that tonight, after they have eaten the cake, they will make love for the first time since the baby was born. Since the baby was born, Mark lies in the bed beside her and groans and keeps tellling her he feels like a rocket about to take off.

She speeds fast going toward the co-op, which is not more than ten or a maximum of fifteen minutes away. She calculates: ten minutes there, five minutes to buy the baking powder, and ten minutes back to the house, not more than thirty minutes in all. What can possibly happen in thirty minutes? She knows Mark would die if he knew she had left Amy alone in the house, but she is certain Amy is perfectly safe with the two big dogs at her side. The good dogs would never allow anyone harmful near her children, she knows. They always set up a terrible racket if a stranger approaches, and the local people are frightened of the big dogs.

It is still quite early, not even ten o'clock yet. Amy knows how to tell the time on the big watch with the Mickey Mouse that her grandmother gave her for her birthday.

She gets down from the swing and walks over and peers at her baby brother in his pram, which was her pram when she was a baby, a long time ago. He is, everyone tells Amy, such a beautiful big baby *boy*. There is something about the way everyone says *boy* that Amy dislikes. Her mother says he's the most beautiful baby *boy* ever, though he wakes her up again and again at night. Even her daddy says he's the most beautiful baby *boy* ever. When her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

father says that, Amy has an urge to give the baby *boy* a little pinch on his pink arm.

Once, when her mother left the room for a moment, she did give him a little pinch, only a tiny little one, on his leg, but it made him scream very loudly, which surprised Amy. Amy had never heard such a loud scream. Her mother came running back into the room and picked him up. She thought he must have been bitten by an insect because there was a red mark on his skin. "Could it have been a spider?" her mother said and looked at Amy inquiringly.

Certainly he is pink and has her father's dark hair. "A chip off the old block," her mother says, looking at her baby and then at Amy's father and laughing. Her mother looks very lovely when she laughs. The baby reminds Amy a little bit of the kittens, with his eyes shut so tightly like theirs. They had to drown the kittens, as there were too many of them. Thomas, who works in the garden three times a week, put them in a sack and dropped them into the river which runs at the bottom of their garden. Amy wonders how many babies are considered too many before they, too, are put in a sack and drowned in the river. If anyone had asked her opinion, she would have told them she preferred being the only one, but no one did.

When the baby's eyes are open, they are quite a startling blue, but now they are shut, and her mother has said all babies start out with blue eyes, Amy did too, and that they might turn dark like hers later on. Then her mother would have two dark-eyed beauties. Amy hopes the eyes won't turn dark.

Babies can't see at all when they are first born, her mother says. Amy wonders about that, how people can know something like that. She lets her hand just touch the top of his head very lightly in the place where she has been told not to touch him. It's a soft spot almost like a heart, she thinks, that seems to beat. Her father is always telling her not to touch the baby's head because this soft spot hasn't closed up completely yet, and for some reason it makes her want to touch that very spot. She is to be very, very careful, her father says. She presses down very gently on the little beating heart, and the baby stirs, waving his pink arms and legs around.

Her baby brother arrived in the night. Babies often arrive in the night, her mother says. They had to lift Amy out of her bed and wrap her in her blanket so she could sleep in the back of the car while they drove all the way to the hospital, but she couldn't sleep because her mother was making such a strange sort of moaning noise. She'd never heard her mother cry out like that. The baby was making her mother moan and use God's name in vain the way her mother had told her never to do.

Her mother kept saying, "Oh God in heaven, the pains are so bad already. How will I bear it?" and her father drove very fast through the night, and Amy was frightened as the car screeched round the curves and her mother kept saying God's name in vain.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was a long way to the hospital. Her father, too, swore at the state of the roads and the bloody government, and said all sorts of bad words he wasn't supposed to say. When they finally arrived, they dumped Amy hurriedly on a hard chair in a waiting room with an old lady she'd never seen before and went away for a long time. Amy didn't like the way the old lady smelled. There was an awful light shining in her eyes, and she couldn't sleep in the chair, and the old lady kept talking to her and saying her daddy would come soon, he had to stay with her mother because she was making a beautiful new baby for Amy and she was not to cry, which made Amy scream louder and louder. Finally her father did come back after hours and hours, it seemed to her, but only to take her to her grandmother's house, which was in the town. She didn't want to stay with her grandmother, who made her eat disgusting boiled spinach and go to bed too early and didn't even have any TV. And when she came home, the baby was there.

Amy moves away from the pram. She thinks she might take a little walk down to the river at the bottom of the garden before her mother comes back, though she knows she is not supposed to go down there alone.

Babies, in her estimation, are not any fun. She had been expecting to play with her little brother the way her mother kept telling her she would be able to do. "You'll have someone to play with," her mother kept saying. But you can't play with a baby. Instead, he screams or lies sleeping and spitting and pooping, and he smells. Everyone hovers around him and brings gifts for him and ignores Amy for some reason. Everyone coos and says how beautiful he is, which is just rubbish, Amy thinks. What is beautiful about this pink thing? Amy thinks the baby looks a little bit like a pink slug or maybe some kind of worm.

Stella has difficulty finding a parking spot near the co-op. She had forgotten it is a Saturday, and all the farmers and their wives seem to have come in to do their shopping at the same moment. Stella circles around through the dusty, congested street, gets caught up behind a big truck, and honks her horn. Finally, she finds a space and rushes out of the car fast, flies up the steps quickly, and enters the cool of the co-op. There is a long line. A black woman stands in front of her with a big basket of produce. If she had been white, Amy would have asked if she might go ahead of her, as she only has the one item, but she is afraid the woman might think she thinks she is better than her, that she is playing the Madame, and has a right to go ahead, so she says nothing but fidgets nervously, looking at her watch as the minutes pass. She thinks about her baby boy and Amy.

Surely he will sleep for an hour if not more, and Amy will play happily in the garden on her own. She is a good child, her Amy, and very clever for her age, always asking questions about every-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thing. She has been rather quiet and serious lately, just staring at Stella with her big dark eyes, particularly since the baby has arrived. Stella is not quite sure what Amy is thinking about sometimes. She thinks of the day the baby suddenly screamed, a loud indignant scream, and she ran to pick him up only to find the red mark on his leg. Was it really an insect bite? Amy looked a little sheepish, watching her pick up the baby and give him her breast. Was there a glimmer of fear in her eyes?

Why is the woman taking so long? And should she give up her errand and just go home without the baking powder she needs for the cake, after all? She is about to give up when the woman finally moves on and it is her turn. The shopkeeper apologizes for the long wait and seems to want to talk to her. Surely the woman can see she is in a hurry? Stella says something about having to run, grabs the packet, and escapes from the shadows of the shop, running down the steps to her car. To her horror, scratching in her handbag she realizes that in her haste she has shut her keys in the car, and the door is locked.

Amy strolls through the long green reeds going towards the Limpopo river. She says the funny lines she loves, which her mother has taught her about the river: "I am going to the great grey-green, greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever-trees, to find out what the Crocodile has for dinner." She likes the cool of the shadows in the reeds and the rushing sound of the wind and the running water. The broad, muddy river, churned up by the heavy rains, runs fast here over the stones.

She is getting hot and thirsty and starting to get hungry. Her mother usually gives her a snack, what she calls elevens, because she has it at eleven o'clock. Amy looks at her watch and sees her mother has been gone for over an hour. She knows she is not allowed to go down to the river on her own, but she decides she will just go for a moment. She will take off her socks and sandals when she gets down there and put her feet in the cool water. She'll splash some water on her face. She knows not to wade too deep into the river because there are crocs in the water and sometimes even sunning themselves on the bank and some of the native people have been caught when they went down to do their washing.

That's when she hears the sound of her baby whimpering. She will go and see what is the matter with him. Perhaps, she thinks, he'd like to come down to the river with her, too. Perhaps he would like some of the cool water on his face. Surely he must get tired of drinking from her mother's breasts all the time. Personally, Amy finds it rather disgusting to watch her brother sucking and sucking on her mother's fat dark nipple. Sometimes a little bit of milk comes out of the side of the baby's mouth. Now that the baby is there Amy's mother smells different, too, milky and sometimes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

slightly sour, and her skin looks different to Amy: pale and thin.

Panicking now, Stella runs down the road to the only garage, which is, fortunately, not very far. The young boy who is the only one there, this Saturday, takes awhile before he understands what she is saying. Finally he says, "How old is your car?" as though that is a relevant piece of information. When she tells him, he says, as Mark did long ago, "No problem, then," and he goes back into the garage walking slowly and casually though she has explained the situation. He comes out waving a wire hanger triumphantly. She stares at him, and he says, "This will do the trick," and follows her down the road to her car.

He seems to have had some practice in the art of breaking into cars. She watches, holding her breath as he inserts the wire hanger between the edge of the window and threads it through and down. He fishes down to pull up the lever to open the door. He tries once and misses and then he tries again and misses. Third time lucky, she says to herself and crosses her fingers behind her back.

Amy goes back to the pram and jiggles it the way her mother told her to, but the baby goes on crying increasingly loudly. She peers down at him and sings him the lullaby her mother sings to him, but this doesn't work either. He doesn't seem to hear her singing or doesn't care for the way she sings the lullaby. He cries louder and louder and his face is very pink and he looks angry. Her mother never lets him cry for a minute before she comes rushing to pick him up and give him her breast.

Amy decides she'll have to pick him up even though her mother told her not to. She doesn't like to hear the awful screaming noise he is making and nor do the dogs, who are stirring around her nervously and brushing against her legs as though to urge her to do something fast.

She'll just pick him up very carefully. There is no reason why she would drop him, after all. She carries her big doll, which is not much smaller than her little brother. She thrusts her hands into the pram and scoops him up. She lifts him up quite easily and holds him up with his head over her shoulder the way Mommy does. She knows he cannot yet hold his head up properly. Miraculously, in her arms, he stops crying. She smells his baby smell of powder and urine and something else mixed in between. He feels warm in her arms.

The dogs are still sniffing around her and getting in her way, but the baby is quiet now, and Amy makes her way back into the cool of the tall reeds, the dogs following along. She'll just take him for a little walk down to the river and put a little water on his face.

Stella tells the young man this doesn't seem to be working. She looks around her, and thinks she will have to hitch a ride. Surely

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

there is someone at the co-op today whom she knows and would take her back to her house? Or even someone she doesn't know. A woman would be safer, but at this point she is ready to ask anyone. She knows almost everyone on the farms around here. She has been gone more than an hour now and she is afraid the baby might be awake. He never sleeps for much more than an hour. But now, when she needs them, everyone seems to have left, going back to their farms for lunch.

She sees a man coming down the road in a black pickup truck which looks a little bit like the one Mark had in Cape Town where they first made love. She stands out in the middle of the road and lifts her thumb. He stops, and she looks down into very blue eyes. She's never seen him before, which is unusual. She is not sure what he is doing here, but he doesn't look like a criminal to her, though he is not a clean-shaven man. She asks him if he can help her and she explains the situation, exaggerating a bit. Dramatically, she says, "It's a matter of life or death." Secretly she hopes the baby might still be fast asleep and Amy probably in the cool of the house having a cup of lemonade to drink, but she wants to make sure.

The man seems to hesitate, looks at his watch. He says he's in a hurry and he's not going in that direction. "It won't take more than five minutes back to my house. Please," she begs. She sees him glance down at her bare legs, and she hesitates for a moment as he leans across and opens the door. Then she walks around and she gets into his car.

Amy wanders on with the baby quiet in her arms now, and the dogs following as she goes down to the river. It is getting hotter and hotter. It is noon, it says on her watch; she can see if she squints. The baby feels more and more heavy in her arms and he is slipping down gradually. She hitches him up a bit and says the words from the poem about the river. She can hear it in the distance and perhaps the baby can too, because he is quiet.

She steps out into the sudden sunlight of the yellow sandy bank of the Limpopo. "See the grey-green, greasy Limpopo," she says to her little brother and smiles at him, and it seems to Amy that he smiles back at her. But he is wriggling around now in her arms and he is too heavy for her to hold for much longer, so she puts him down on the sand in the shade of a big brown log, and she sits down next to him and waves a fly away from his face. He seems to like it down by the river as she does herself. Perhaps he, too, likes the sound of the water or the waving of the fever-trees above his head. Or perhaps he just likes lying in the sand. Amy lies back beside him. His very blue eyes are open and he seems to be watching her as Amy gets up and walks away from him. She goes toward the water to just put her toes in. She takes off her sandals and looks back at him and it seems to her that the baby is smiling,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but perhaps it is just a shadow from the fever-tree.

The man drives excruciatingly slowly along the strip road. Stella feels called upon to make polite conversation with him, though she is more and more nervous as the time goes by. She asks him if he is new in the area.

He says, "Just passing through," which seems an odd thing to say. It is not an area that one just passes through. He is not a talkative man, she gathers, which is all right with her. She has no need for conversation. What she wants is to push his foot down on the accelerator and go fast down the road. She says, "I'm so worried my baby might have woken up."

The man says he doesn't know much about children as he's never had any. He says this in the tone of someone who doesn't care much about children either. He says he doesn't want to ruin the tires of his car on the strip road.

Finally they are on the stretch of tarmacked road going toward her house, and the man goes a little faster. Stella breathes more easily. She feels a compliment might be appropriate at this point. "This is so kind of you. I really appreciate it. We'll be there in a minute, now."

"Time for a quickie, perhaps?" the man says and puts his hand on her leg.

The baby is kicking his legs in the air and whimpering again, so Amy scoops up a little water and carries it over to him in her hands. She pours a little on the top of his head, on his beating soft spot. He seems to like that and turns quiet. She pretends she's the priest and she is baptising the baby all over again. She says his name solemnly, the same name as her father's: "Mark, I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost," she says as the priest did. She feels very solemn and rather sleepy and she closes her eyes for a minute and remembers the christening.

The whole family had gone to the church in the town for the baptism only a few days after the baby was born. Even her favourite grandmother from Cape Town had come up for the ceremony and wore a hat with flowers in the brim. Her mother had dressed the baby up in the long lace christening gown Amy had worn too, and before her her mother. Everyone had crowded around the font and the priest had poured water on her baby's head and mumbled the words Amy has remembered. She likes saying these words. Amy goes to get more water from the river to do it all over again. She decides to give her brother a new name, to name him anew with more water.

Stella ignores the man and stares at the road. "Only kidding," he says, and grins at her, but he still has his hand on her leg. She notices the black hairs on the backs of his thick fingers. "Nice legs,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he says as he strokes. He is driving more and more slowly and her heart is beating so loudly now she feels it must be shaking the car.

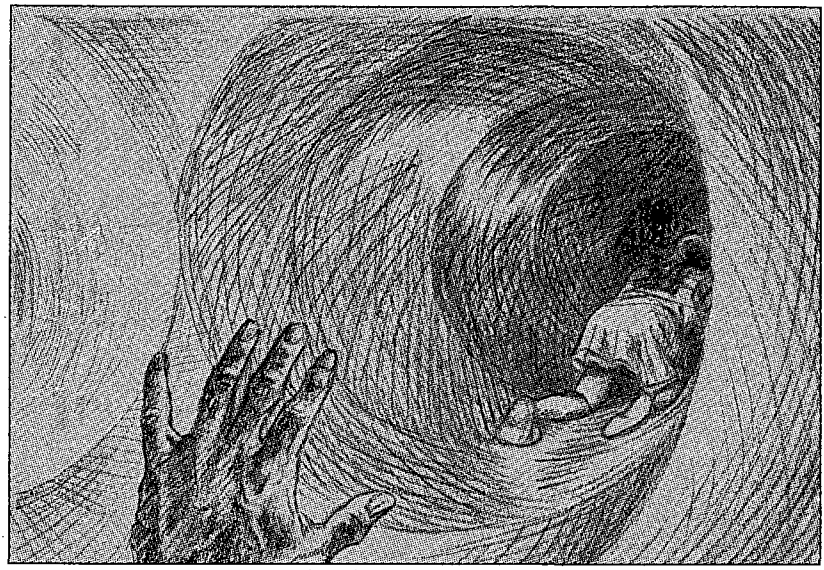
"Please," she says, "just drive me home," but instead, he stops the car completely and reaches for her. But she is waiting for a move of this kind. She feels her whole body uncoil and spring forth. She throws open the door and flings herself fast out of the car into the sunshine. She almost falls in the dust. She starts to run. She runs off the side of the road and into the bush and as she runs she turns her head and watches as the man goes fast now past her, swings his car with a screech of wheels in the other direction. She can hear the sound of his laughing. He is waving to her wildly, the dust rising and coating the grass at the side of the road. Then she begins to run again, running and running as fast as she can, her legs in the grass, going toward her house.

Amy is hot and feels hungry and tired. She wonders what has happened to her mommy and why she hasn't come home when she said she would. Amy decides to take off her dress and her ribbon in her hair and splashes water all over her body. She goes a little further into the water, looking around for crocs. The dogs have slunk off into the shade and left her alone. Her mommy has been gone such a long time now. Amy looks at her watch but can hardly make out the hands. She's getting muddled up with the sun on her head, and now the baby has started up crying again and beating his legs and arms around desperately. He is hungry, too, she understands, and he misses their mother. Why has her mother not come back to them?

When Stella arrives at the house, sweating and panting, there is no sign of the baby in the pram or Amy or the dogs. She hears no sound except the sound of the river running. What could have happened to them? She runs through the house desperately looking in all the rooms, throwing open cupboard doors, even looking behind the curtain in the bath, but there is no sign of them there. Is it possible they could have been kidnapped, eaten by leopards, carried off by marauding natives? All sorts of wild thoughts go through her mind. Or would Amy have thought to go to the servants' quarters to look for the nanny?

Then Stella thinks of the river, which she knows Amy loves, and starts to run down the path through the reeds that lead down there. She stops and puts her hands to her eyes in the glare. She sees something by the side of the dark river. Something or someone is lying there. She runs across the sand. Amy lies asleep on the bank of the river in the shade of the trees. She has managed to lift the baby up over her and put him on her bare stomach and chest and balance him there. The baby is rooting around with his face down against her chest, looking for her tick of a nipple.●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Jason Eckhardt

The World in Primary Colors

by Scott William Carter

The sign was quite clear—*No Adults Allowed. Thank you.* Like an afterthought, it was affixed to the red plastic tunnel with masking tape, slightly askew, handwritten on a white sheet of paper with a black marker. The paper had started to yellow and bubble with age, which was strange, because Doug didn't remember the sign being there last time—and that had been only a few weeks earlier. Of course Rosie had never asked him to take her into the plaything before, preferring simply to watch other kids, so he may not have noticed.

Rosie tugged on his hand. "Go in, Da-ee? Go in wid Wosie?"

The room smelled faintly of baking pizza. Her small hand felt slightly sweaty. Doug adjusted his glasses and leaned closer to the sign, hoping for some small-print addendum that might let him pass. As a corporate tax accountant, he was trained to look for such addendums—loopholes, exceptions, and special circumstances

©2007 by Scott William Carter

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to turn what was illegal into what was merely inconvenient—and he often found himself doing this in his private life, too. But in this case, no such luck.

The screeching and laughter of the children echoed all around them. The play equipment at Locomotion Pizza was in a separate room, its walls and ceiling almost entirely glass. Outside, mere inches from where children played, a steady pulse of traffic passed on Roosevelt Boulevard, but the glass was thick enough that it muted most of the noise. On the wall connecting them to the main part of the restaurant was a mural of an old steam engine passing through the mountains. The ceiling had been painted a perfect blue, but the real sky outside was a metallic gray, like the dull side of aluminum foil.

More than two dozen of Scott William Carter's short stories have been published in magazines such as *Analog Science Fiction and Fact, Asimov's Science Fiction, EQMM, Weird Tales,* and *Realms of Fantasy.* He makes a second appearance in *EQMM* with a tale that touches on every parent's fear. Mr. Carter is himself the father of two young children. He lives in Oregon's lush Willamette Valley. †

Doug's mood always rose and fell a little with the weather, but the overcast skies didn't seem to affect the kids one bit. They crowded eagerly around the video games in the corner, bounded through thousands of plastic balls in the area covered with black netting, and clambered after one another through the huge, castle-like structure of interconnecting tunnels.

The castle was the crown jewel of the play area, and the thing Rosie talked about incessantly for days after a visit—as big as a small house, each tunnel a different solid color, red, yellow, blue, with plastic bubble windows at various junctures and three different slides, some straight, some that curled like twisty fries. If only they had toys like *that* when he was growing up. But of course, he knew he had been a little timid, like Rosie, perhaps even more so.

He squatted down next to her. Children's laughter echoed inside the tunnel.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said, squeezing her hand. "It says I can't. But *you* can go in. I'll watch you."

Her face darkened—lips compressing to a horizontal line, dark eyebrows bowing into the mirror image of checkmarks. It was an expression he had seen on Autumn's face many times. Rosie was the spitting image of her mother—round brown eyes; fair, freckled skin; hair like dark chocolate and tied in a ponytail. *Oh, she looks so much like you, Autumn! She could be your clone!* Doug had heard that more times than he could count. What he hated was not the comment, but how people would always gave him this *look,* as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

if they were either feeling sorry for him because she was physically so different—with his sandy hair, blue eyes; and darker skin, really more of an opposite—or they were just a tiny bit suspicious that the child was not, in fact, his.

She wore a white dress over a red and blue plaid shirt, his favorite outfit, one that made her look a little like Raggedy Ann. She fiddled with the hem. "But I wan' you go in, Da-ee!" she insisted.

He smiled. "I know that, dear. But it's against the rules."

"Wules?"

"That's right. You know . . . Kind of like how Mommy tells you not to kick the table at dinnertime. That's a rule. Well, this is a rule, too. Daddies can't go in there. It's just for kids."

"Tids?"

"That's right, dear."

She hesitated a moment, gears turning, before saying with even more gusto than before: "But I wan' you go in, Da-ee!"

Doug sighed. It was May, with the long days of tax season behind him, and he'd taken the afternoon off just to make her happy. He hadn't been spending nearly enough time with her lately, getting home long after she went to bed, and the guilt had been gnawing at him. This was their first stop. So what if he had a bad back and tendonitis in his wrists? He'd survive. It might even be fun. Break a few rules, be a rebel.

"All right," he said reluctantly. "You go first."

Swallowing, she started inside, only having to hunch a little. Doug followed on his hands and knees, glancing over his shoulder right before he went into the tunnel. Sure enough, just as he feared, a woman pushed through the double glass doors into the play area right at that moment. She was short and mousy, but she had a mean frown, the way his middle-school librarian, Mrs. Hampton, frowned when she caught someone sticking gum under the card catalog. He smiled weakly, then followed Rosie.

The plastic felt gritty, like the plastic bowls at home felt, the ones they'd had since college. Years of sweaty hands had given the tunnel the musty smell of a locker room. Rosie hesitated where the tunnel started up, and Doug encouraged her, holding her waist as she climbed. "Step here," he said. "Use the footholds." With each step, she gained confidence. Doug had a little more trouble, his leather shoes slipping. Eventually they reached a landing, where the color went from red to bright yellow. Tiny plastic bubbles above let in light, and other than a glimpse of the blue ceiling, he couldn't see anything outside.

Rosie was nearly at the next tunnel, one that went up another forty-five degree angle. Doug, however, was already winded.

"Wait a minute," he said, leaning against the wall.

"But I wan' go dere, Da-ee!"

"I know, dear. But just . . . wait a second. Isn't this neat? We're

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

way up here, in this castle."

She stared at him, brown eyes blinking. Sometimes talking with her, he felt like he was Mission Control and she was on the space shuttle, and he had to wait for his signal to bridge the vast distance between them.

"Way up 'ere?" she said.

"Right. Way up here."

The next tunnel was blue, the next one after that green, twisting left and right, sometimes straight, sometimes climbing. Rosie chattered excitedly, repeatedly saying, "Way up, Da-ee, way up 'ere." She got a little ahead of Doug, and then when he rounded a sharp bend, entering another blue tunnel, she was already out of sight. He heard the sounds of shoes squeaking and thumping, but they seemed as if they were coming from a long ways off.

"Rosie?" he said.

When she didn't answer, a vicious panic took hold of him. The tunnel darkened, going from blue to black, pressing in on him, tightening. He put his hands against the sides, as if he could hold the vise at bay, but the feeling persisted. There was pressure on his lungs, as if someone was sitting on his chest. Each breath came short and quick, and he felt sweat break out all over—on his back, his forehead, his neck. He'd never felt such intense anxiety in all his life—the only time he'd felt anything even remotely similar was when his father died years ago—and he told himself it was foolish. She was just a little ahead. Christ. Calm down. *Calm.*

He was still sitting there trying to get a hold of himself when a brown-skinned boy in a blue baseball cap scooted around the bend, coming from the direction Rosie had gone. He gave Doug a curious look.

"It's okay," Doug said. "I'm with her."

The kid frowned, then passed without a word and continued down, a little faster than he had been moving before. Great. Kid was probably going to complain to Mommy that some adult was up here.

"Da-ee?" Rosie called from up ahead.

Relief flooded through him. "Coming, dear," he said. "Just wait, okay?"

When he caught up to her, she was crouching by a round window, one that bubbled outward as if they were on the inside of an eye looking out. She faced away from him, tiny fingers pressed up against the scuffed plastic. There were actually four windows, one on all three sides, plus one above. Just beyond the area, a blue tunnel continued upward, and another, a short green one, ended at the beginning of a slide.

"Look, Da-ee! Look!" Rosie said.

"You really shouldn't go ahead of me like that, Rosie," Doug said, crawling up next to her. Sweat glued his polo shirt to his back. "Daddy likes to be able to see you, and if you . . ."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He trailed off, having gotten a glimpse of the play area down below. He saw something, something black moving along the wall, that didn't seem quite right. He moved closer to the window and looked beyond the tiny fingerprints and the scratch marks and saw the mural of the train—but it wasn't just a mural anymore. The train was *moving,* white puffs rising from its smokestack, the whole thing chugging along the wall, as if it wasn't a wall at all but a giant television screen. And that wasn't all. The train had changed, now less realistic and more a cartoon, shorter, more compact, and with giant yellow wheels. Then he recognized it. It looked like the toy train Rosie had at home.

"Look!" Rosie said again. "Look!"

He looked where she was pointing and saw that the green plastic floor was no longer plastic, but real grass, at least a foot high. The doors to the restaurant were huge and crooked. The restaurant, through the glass windows, was out of focus. He saw the shapes of people, but he couldn't make out any of their features. Two squealing boys ran past, and their faces were clear but huge; their heads were at least twice the size they should have been, bulging as if someone had inflated them with air.

Doug blinked a few times, but nothing changed. "That's odd," he said. He cleaned his glasses on his shirt, but this didn't do the trick either.

Rosie smiled at him. "We up eye!"

It took him a moment to realize what she meant. "Yes," he said. "We're very high. Honey . . . what do you see out there?"

She stared. Earth to space shuttle, waiting . . .

"Dere?"

"Yes. Do things . . . do they look different?"

She looked at him a moment longer, then clambered past him. "Look, Da-ee! Side! Go side now!"

Doug looked back at the window. Surely if she saw the same thing, she would have said something . . . He looked more closely at the clear plastic, wondering if it was some kind of trick, a projection maybe, but he didn't see any equipment.

His heart racing, he joined Rosie. She glanced at the slide and bit down on her lower lip. The green plastic angled downward steeply. He didn't like heights much. He also didn't like going fast. A bad combination.

"Why don't you get on my lap, honey," he said. He sat at the edge of the slide, his legs extended in front of him.

She hesitated.

"It's okay, dear," he said. "You'll be with me."

Slowly, she moved onto his lap. She was no longer a little feather, and he stifled a groan when the full weight of her settled onto him. But when she clutched onto the scruff of his slacks and leaned into him, her back warm against his chest, he felt a tingle

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

up his spine. He placed his arms lightly around her and scooted forward. For just a second, before he pushed off, he saw them from the outside, a snapshot of father and daughter, and he told himself to remember it. This moment here. Put it in the scrapbook of his mind.

They zoomed around the curves, picking up speed as they raced over the green plastic, each of them laughing. He felt the rush of air on his face. It lasted only a moment, and then they were at the bottom, his long legs skidding on the grass.

Real grass.

Giggling, Rosie hopped off his lap and headed back for the tunnel's entrance. "Side!" she cried. "Go side!"

Doug rose, so mystified he barely noticed the ache in his knees. The room . . . The grass felt soft beneath his shoes. The locomotive grinded and screeched along its tracks. Big-headed children dressed in solid blues and greens ran past, laughing, and the few adults around the room were looking at Doug with out-of-focus faces. He glanced at the castle and saw that it was a real castle now, with towers and parapets, although still painted in alternating solid colors.

Rosie stood by the tunnel waiting for him, but it was no longer a tunnel; it was an arched entryway that crossed a moat of sparkling blue water.

"Sir," a young man said.

Doug looked in the direction of the voice and saw a scarecrow with black button eyes, only he wore black jeans and the yellow polo shirt with the black train on it, the shirt the employees wore. His straw body shimmered like gold.

"You really shouldn't be in here, sir," the scarecrow said. And for just a moment, his real face came into view—a face with acne scars and patchy facial hair, a textured face of shadows and hues and imperfections.

Rosie protested, but Doug didn't want to make a scene, so they headed for the car. But it wasn't his car, not exactly. His Ford Explorer was now solid blue, tires and all, and it bulged like an inflated beach toy. All the cars were like that. The tall pines around the restaurant had been replaced by giant, two-dimensional Christmas trees, like something Rosie might make at daycare with butcher paper. All the buildings lining the street were made of blocks, some plastic with notches on the top, some wood with numbers and letters on the side. Inside the passing cars, Doug saw not people but giant stuffed animals and life-size dolls.

Unlocking the car, he saw that his keys were no longer metal, but red and rubbery like a child's eraser. He lifted Rosie into the backseat, and instead of her car seat, found a purple octopus. She climbed into it, and he lowered the tentacled arms over her.

"Go 'ome, Da-ee?" Rosie said.

"Yes, dear," he said, and it was as if someone else was speaking. Home. Yes, home. Get his bearings. But even as he thought this,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the world shimmered. Some of the cars changed to real cars. Driving home, paper trees turned to real trees, and blue sky became gray. Rosie sang happily, oblivious, but Doug gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white. A small green brontosaurus, walking upright and pulling a red wagon, changed to a homeless man in army fatigues pushing a rusted shopping cart.

By the time he reached his house, the world was back to normal and he saw the house as it was—a one-story ranch with flaking gray paint, piles of rotting leaves in the driveway, a lawn going to seed. After pulling into the cluttered garage, he retrieved Rosie and carried her into the house. He passed through the galley kitchen, which stank of rotten milk, the sink full of dishes. When he rounded the corner into the family room, he saw Autumn sitting in the rocking chair inches from the television. Some talk show was on, but she stared blankly ahead, her eyes glassy. The shades were drawn, and the room flickered along with the television.

"Mommy!" Rosie cried.

"Oh," Doug said, putting Rosie down. "I didn't know you'd be home."

Rosie ran to her side, gripping the armrest, but Autumn didn't look at her. Her hair, more gray than brown these days, drooped over her wan face. She still wore her blue hospital scrubs, and he saw a tiny spot of blood on her sleeve. She had been a phlebotomist for nearly ten years, and it was the first time he could remember seeing blood on her clothes. Usually, she was quick to wash it off, as she said even a little stain could alarm the patients.

"I was tired," Autumn said.

"Are you sick?"

She didn't answer.

"Did something happen at work?" he pressed.

"Doug, please," she said quietly.

Rosie jumped up and down. "Da-ee and Wosie go side, Mommy!" she cried. "Side!"

Closing her eyes, Autumn leaned her head back against the rocking chair. For a moment, she looked like her mother looked the last time Doug saw her, back in the nursing home when she was in the full clutches of Alzheimer's, her face stretched and pale. "Can you just leave me alone for a while, please?" she said, her voice dying to a whisper.

Doug was going to tell her about the amazing thing that just happened to him, but the impulse dissolved in his anger. Lately she'd been having more and more of these moody phases, and he was sick of it. It was one thing to ignore him, but another to ignore Rosie. "What's happened to you, anyway?"

But when she answered, it wasn't with words. Her eyes remained closed, but tears streaked down her face. Rosie looked alarmed, and started to reach for her mother, but Doug didn't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

want her to see Autumn like this. He guided Rosie to her bedroom and shut the door just as Autumn began sobbing. The wood was thick, but he could still hear her. He turned on Rosie's CD player, a song about counting animals.

He looked at Rosie. She stood in front of her toddler bed, clasping her hands and biting down on her lower lip. The rest of the house may have been a mess, but Rosie's room was perfect, the bed neatly made, all the books and toys on their shelves, all the tops of the dressers clean. Doug kept it that way.

"Mommy sad, Da-ee?" Rosie said. "Mommy ha' tears?"

Doug swallowed away the lump in his throat. "Yes, dear. Mommy's a little sad right now."

"Mommy ha' ow-ee?"

"No, not exactly."

"Why Mommy sad, Da-ee?"

He kneeled in front of her and tried to smile, though his face felt like dried wax. "Sometimes," he began, and had to start over when his throat constricted. "Sometimes people are just sad, honey. Sometimes . . . there is no reason why. But Mommy will get better. I promise. We just need to give her time."

She looked unconvinced, but he managed to distract her with a toy fire engine, and soon she was laughing again.

The strange thing that happened didn't happen the next day, or the next, and he was too afraid to go back to the pizza place. But on the weekend, when he was pushing Rosie on a tire swing at the park, it happened again. The swing changed to a red crop-duster with a bright yellow propeller. Rosie swooped around in a circle, her head bent low in the cockpit and her ponytail flapping behind her. The jungle gym turned into a blue rocket ship with yellow fins. Two kids in white spacesuits looked out from the hatch.

This time, Doug wasn't scared. In fact, he realized he had been secretly hoping it would happen again. The grit and grime of reality returned on the walk home, but he was left with a pleasant feeling, like the buzz from a good brandy. He took the following Wednesday off and took Rosie to the zoo, and while they were there, the concrete walkways faded and they found themselves in a lush jungle, surrounded by animals, but not animals that could bite or claw. These animals were big, fluffy, and friendly, like the animals from her picture books.

Doug decided he liked Rosie's world. He started taking off early in the day to do things with her—the mall, where every shop was a toy shop with toys that talked back, the riverfront carousel, where there were horses with manes like silk and hides like satin, and the beach, where dolphins dressed in tuxedos emerged from the surf to tell them stories of the undersea world. The more he did, the longer this wonderful new reality lasted. He saw all of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED.

Rosie's friends brought to life—Marmar, Slow Joe, Big Cat, Little Cat, and thousands of others he didn't know by name. He was burning through his vacation days, and he wanted more.

Three weeks after that first experience at Locomotion Pizza, Doug was crunching numbers on a spreadsheet when his boss, Gabe, stopped by his cubicle.

"You wanted to see me, old buddy?" he said.

Doug saved the file and swiveled in his chair to face him. Gabe had both hands on the edge of the cubicle and was peering around it, as if he had been passing and remembered Doug's e-mail at the last moment. They had been friends for years, playing racquetball before their knees gave out, playing board games with their wives before their children devoured their evenings, until now they rarely saw each other outside the office. Autumn used to say—back when she and Doug used to do things like talk—that Gabe looked like a repressed hippie. He wore a white shirt and dark slacks, but his personality still showed in his ponytail, his thick moustache, and his trippy rainbow tie. His glasses had a slight red tint.

The sounds of the office surrounded them: clicking keyboards, humming printers, and the steady background drone of people speaking on phones. It was a gray world, with gray walls and gray carpet. Even the fluorescent light seemed flaccid and dull.

"Yes," Doug said. "I was wondering . . . Well, I was thinking . . ." He didn't realize this would be so hard. "I was thinking, if it's all right with you, that—that I'd like to take a leave of absence. Unpaid, of course."

Gabe had watery blue eyes, the kind of eyes that used to get him laid all the time back in college, or so he said, but they looked purple through the glasses. He narrowed them. "You're serious?"

"Yes."

"How much time we talking about here?"

"Um . . . I don't know. A month?"

Gabe sighed and stepped around into the cubicle. He reached for a door, but there was no door, so he turned and sat on Doug's metal desk. Gabe's tie-dyed socks had the same swirl of colors as his tie. When Gabe spoke, he lowered his voice to just above a whisper.

"I talked to Autumn," he said.

Doug didn't understand where he was going with this. "Yeah?"

"She's worried about you, man."

"Worried about *me?*"

"That's right. She said you've been acting strange."

Doug felt the cubicle walls collapsing in on him, the same feeling he had back at Locomotion Pizza, but this time it only lasted a second before it was replaced with his rising anger. He felt his jaw grow tight. "She said *I'm* acting strange? What about her? She's the one going through some weird, delayed version of postpartum depression."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Doug—"

"If anybody's acting strange, it's her. She . . . she should see someone. Get some help. It's ruining our family, what she's doing. She—"

Gabe placed his hand on Doug's shoulder, silencing him. "She *is,* man. She is seeing someone."

The comment derailed Doug. "What?"

Gabe looked at Doug for a long time with sad eyes, the way someone looks at an old family dog who's started snapping at invisible squirrels. Did he know about Rosie's world? Doug hadn't told anyone yet, not even Autumn.

Finally, Gabe sighed and headed out of the cubicle. When he'd reached the hall, he glanced over his shoulder.

"Take all the time you need, Doug," he said. "But you guys should talk. *Really.*"

On the way home, moving from one stoplight to another in a slow waltz with hundreds of other cars, Doug thought about what Gabe had said. He knew he needed to talk to Autumn, that their marriage was disintegrating in a barrage of silent moments, but he just couldn't bring himself to care about that now. He wanted to spend more time with Rosie. He wanted smiling purple bears and magic-carpet rides, not therapists who talked in monotones and loud arguments about how neither of them knew what the other was feeling. He wanted a world of soft edges and primary colors, not one with sharp corners and a little gray in everything.

Then, as he was turning onto their street, one lined with pin oaks and leafy maples, the most amazing thing happened. The world changed. It changed, and Rosie wasn't even with him. The cars parked on the street became green and yellow tugboats, the road a bright blue river twisting through banks lined with palm trees. He turned where their house should be, but it wasn't a house; it was a white spaceship shaped like a half-inflated beach ball. A door opened in the ship, a ramp extended, and he motored his boat inside. But it wasn't a boat. It was a motorcycle. It was a horse. It was a leather-bound book with feathered white wings.

The doors whisked open and he walked into an igloo, the walls made not of ice, but white shiny blocks. Passing the dining room, he saw a sparkling beach and six monkeys in pink dresses having tea around a picnic table. He heard Rosie's music coming from her room, and her singing along with it. He was turning toward the hall, now a rope bridge across a deep canyon, when Autumn called out to him.

"Doug," she said.

Her voice sounded as if it was coming from the living room. He turned in that direction and he was walking along the deck of a sailboat. The sails fluttered, and he smelled salt water on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

breeze. He knew Rosie's world was becoming more real to him, and he was exhilarated by it. But then he saw Autumn, head bowed, waiting for him at the aft of the ship, and the world around her was the old world, fuzzy at the edges. She sat on their old burgundy couch, piles of unfolded laundry on either side of her. He saw the scratches and the smudges in the off-white walls. He saw the lint and dirt in the taupe carpet at her feet. Autumn—dressed in a gray sweatshirt and sweatpants, holes in the knees—looked up at him and frowned.

He stopped a few paces away, afraid to go closer. "Something amazing is happening to me," he said.

Sighing, Autumn closed her eyes and brought her hands up to her face as if to pray. She breathed deeply for a moment, then stood. When she looked at him, he saw that the shadows under her eyes were so deep they could have been carved with a knife.

"This has to end, Doug," she said.

"What has to end?"

"This! This . . . *thing* you're doing."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm changing, Autumn. I'm changing and I like what's happening. I'm—I'm seeing what Rosie sees."

She bit down on her lower lip, the perfect imitation of her daughter, and closed her eyes again. She tucked her arms around herself in a tight hug. When she opened her eyes, there was moisture in them, and when she spoke, her voice was so strained it didn't sound like her own.

"Doug," she said. "Doug . . . I let you pretend. I thought it would help you. But it's got to stop now. It's been six months."

The fuzzy edges of the grungy living room pushed outward, enveloping a few more feet of the sailboat and the ocean. Doug felt a clamp tightening on his chest, and he took a step backward.

"What are you talking about?" he said.

"Doug, listen to me—"

"Why are you doing this?"

"I want you—"

"Can't you let me be happy? I'm happy. I'm—"

"Stop!" she cried. More burgundy couch appeared, more dirty carpet. "Just stop! Christ, don't you remember what happened at the pizza place? For God's sake, it was in the paper. . . . It happened so fast, you said, just turned around a second . . . just a *second* . . . " Her voice choked on the words. The scuffed walls extended, and he saw crooked paintings and cobwebs in the corner. "Don't you remember the trial, Doug? Don't you remember how you screamed at him? Jesus, don't you remember the *funeral?!*"

The boat faded and flickered and then he was just standing in a dim living room, the curtains half open, the weak light cutting

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

across the easy chair and the carpet like a wall between them. And the harsh memories started to return, like unwanted houseguests, and he tried to close the doors of his mind.

"She's . . . she's not . . ." he began.

"She is!" she said fiercely.

"But she can't . . . I've seen . . ."

"Doug," she said, with a little more gentleness. "Doug, I know it's been hard. Especially for you. But—but we can't . . . We can't go on like this. You've got to face what happened, Doug. You've got to accept it. You've *got* to. You've . . . You've . . ."

But the rest was lost in a fit of sobbing. She turned away from him, and he stared helplessly, watching the way her shoulders shook. In a daze, he turned away from her, heading back through the living room to the dark hall. Rosie. He had to see Rosie. He saw the flaking paint along the trim, the dead fly inside the opaque light fixture. The walls closed in on him, tightening, squeezing the air out of his lungs. He stumbled, sliding against the wall and knocking off a framed picture of Rosie. When it struck the carpet, the glass cracked. His temple throbbed, pain flaring behind his eyes, but he pushed on, staggering into her room.

"Da-ee?"

He blinked away the sweat in his eyes and saw her standing by her bookshelf, wearing her white dress with the red and blue plaid shirt, the Raggedy Ann outfit, his favorite. The one she was wearing the day they went to Locomotion Pizza. It was going to be their day, a special day. She clutched her favorite stuffed animal against her chest, a blue rabbit, and looked up at him with worry. The room around her was clean and tidy. He kept it that way. The rest of the house was a disaster, but not this room. *Not this room.*

Behind him, he heard Autumn sobbing in the living room, and he turned and closed the door. He leaned his head against the wood, his pulse like a raging river in his ears. Autumn was right. He had to deal with this. They couldn't go on this way. He had to be a man now—accept what he'd lost, what he could never get back.

"Mommy sad, Da-ee?" Rosie said behind him. "Mommy ha' tears?"

He turned and looked at her, and just for a moment, in the time it took to blink, he saw the Rosie they found in that man's van—a dark gash along her forehead, blood covering half her face, her dress covered with red spatters. Then it was gone, and she looked as she had before, only with tears in her eyes. She wrung the rabbit in her little hands.

"That's right, honey," he said. "Mommy's sad."

"Why Mommy sad, Da-ee?" she said. "Why?"

He opened his mouth to speak but no words came. He felt a cold

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

chill, the coldest he'd ever felt in his life, and he shuddered violently. She rushed to him, hugging his legs. He patted her hair. She was so warm and solid he couldn't see how she could possibly be fake. He dropped down to her and pulled her away from him, looking into her moist eyes. There were worlds in those eyes. He had seen them.

"Sometimes," he began, and he was planning on saying the rest. *Sometimes,* he was going to say, *there is no why.* But before he could, her room changed. He saw the rumpled sheets on her bed, the same as they had been the day she left. He saw the books stacked haphazardly on the carpet, the pile of toys by the closet, the dirty clothes in front of the changing table. He saw the dust on the blinds and a spider camped out in the corner. And the smell—the staleness of the air, how it had lost the scent of her over time and now only smelled like death. Even this, he thought. Even this is taken from me.

He hugged her violently against him. He had to deal with this. But it wasn't about dealing. It was about *deciding.* And then he knew what he had to do. He picked up Rosie and ran with her through the house. When he passed the living room, Autumn called out to him, but he kept going. He rushed into the garage, hit the button, and quickly buckled Rosie into her car seat. Never forget to buckle. *Never.*

"We going, Da-ee?" she said.

"Yes, dear," he said. "We're going."

And then he was in his Ford Explorer, starting the engine. As he was backing out of the garage, Autumn appeared at the door, her face red, filled with confusion. She said something, but he couldn't hear her over the engine. He was in the street, and he shifted into gear. Autumn followed him, shouting, and now he could hear her. *We've got to deal with this! Don't run away!* But he pressed down on the gas pedal and sped away from her. He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw her in the middle of the street, running after him. Only it wasn't her anymore. It was the horrible vibrating ball that Rosie hated, the one someone had given to her on her birthday. It bounded after them, but they were too fast. They were getting away.

"Where we going, Da-ee?" Rosie asked.

Instead of answering, he stepped on the gas, speeding up the car. Only it wasn't a car. It was a giant eagle, but plush, with feathers as soft as Rosie's hair. The wings flapped and they leaned low, racing over the road. Only it wasn't a road. It was a runway, with a bright yellow control tower at the end, a smiling blue cat inside giving them the thumbs up. The eagle lifted them up into the sky, high up over the neighborhood. Only it wasn't the neighborhood. It was Rosie's world—a world with soft edges and primary colors, a world with no gray in it at all.●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

CAMERA GUY

by Mark Barsotti

I hate doors without peepholes. Not only have I always been an unabashed voyeur, but the lack of a peephole led me here: scribbling in a notebook while hunkered in the last row of a midnight Greyhound, wheezing out of the San Diego bus station for points east and unknown.

Has it only been a week since Camera Guy came knocking at my door? Just drifting off for an afternoon nap, I pulled a pillow over my face and ignored that knock. It persisted, probably my grumpy, ex-Marine landlord badgering me about the rent. No. The check, for once, had been mailed on time.

"Go away," I grunted. Then it struck me that it could be a FedEx from Sal, my agent, or maybe—my groggy mind leapt wildly toward wish fulfillment—it was an exotic woman in peril. Playing white knight might not only get me laid for the first time in ages, but the lady-in-peril's story could be the Big Idea I needed, a tale soon transformed into a comeback screenplay that would have Hollywood clamoring for my services again.

A fantasy, sure, but they're my stock-in-trade, so I got up and shuffled through my apartment. It's a great space: four rooms a mile from the beach and dirt cheap for San Diego (a grand a month), since the six-unit building is tucked along a cul-de-sac in a light industrial area. The perfect refuge for an artist on the skids.

Perfect *except* for a door without a goddamned peephole, leaving me no way to scope the owner of that insistent fist without

Mark Barsotti lives in San Diego, where, he says, he "keeps [himself] in ink and paper selling life insurance." He first attempted to write fiction when he was about ten years old. Most of his work contains elements of the fantastic, but with "Camera Guy" he stuck closer to mystery and suspense and got his first professional sale. We hope he'll write more in our field. ✝

©2007 by Mark Barsotti

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

opening up.

So I opened up.

And I got my story, all right, a whopper delivered by one Jay Maxwell Marshall, black-sheep scion of a blueblood Boston clan, steeped in old money and exotic vice. Ignorant, at that point, of Jay Max's pedigree, I took my unkempt caller for a panhandler, more ambitious than most, working door to door.

"Yeah?" I asked with a yawn, but my sleepy writer's mind noted details. My caller had an old hippie's wild mane of graying brown hair. Shirtless, khaki shorts, orange Chuck Taylor sneakers. He was rail-thin, save for a little potbelly, and had leathery skin the color and consistency of an old catcher's mitt. The big, sad eyes were a hazy green, like the surf at OB. A beach boy gone to rot.

"I need help," he said.

My slam-the-door impulse was stayed by an odd, altruistic twinge, solidarity with the downtrodden, perhaps, since my career freefall threatened to land me in their ranks. Sal fed me occasional hackwork like the "Alan Smithee" script for *My Mother the Car,* but I hadn't had a fresh idea in months. And only a killer concept could resurrect me from Tinseltown oblivion.

"Uh, sure," I said, fishing for pocket change. "But I don't have much."

"I don't want money," he said, peering past me into the apartment.

"No?" Stepping out onto my balcony, I eased the door *almost* shut behind me, not so much concerned about my caller as sullen that all this was cutting into nap time. "What then?"

"I just need to use your cell phone."

"Don't have one," I confessed, that alone grounds enough to get me drummed out of the Screenwriters Guild.

I *like* being unplugged and got rid of my cell last fall, long after it had stopped ringing.

"I need to call the police."

My interest piqued, I finally noticed the expensive 35mm camera with telephoto lens slung over his shoulder. Camera Guy didn't reek of booze or dumpster-diving.

"Why?"

"I'm in trouble. Please, one quick call?"

I nodded and said I'd get my cordless. He started to follow me inside, but curiosity doesn't mean all caution to the wind. I ordered him to wait, ducked inside, and considered throwing the deadbolt and returning to bed.

But ignoring Camera Guy might spark a rage he could vent on my '67 Mustang, defenseless in the driveway below.

Plus, he'd managed to rouse my long-slumbering muse, now starting to riff about an old hippie packing an expensive camera, but without change enough for a pay phone. I stood pondering all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this in the living room until Camera Guy knocked again. Best not keep my new collaborator waiting.

He accepted the phone and announced, "Four-one-one," while punching in digits. "Yes, Operator," he said, glancing over his shoulder at the motel up the street. "Please connect me to the Boston Police Department."

Boston? I was so intrigued now that it didn't occur to me that I'd be footing the long distance.

"Damn." He mashed the OFF button. "It didn't go through."

"Why Boston?" I asked, taking back the phone. "Why not the local cops?"

"Long story." He plunged his hands into pockets that bulged with what looked like film canisters. "You wouldn't believe it anyway."

"Try me."

"Okay." He licked thin lips and announced, "I'm Jay Maxwell Marshall."

"Hi, Jay. Tim Wolfe."

We shook as he again gazed up the street. "My family owns a fair-sized chunk of Boston."

"Landed gentry, eh? So, you out slumming?"

"I haven't seen them in years," he said dismissively. "My brother Cal tracked me down 'cause our mom just died."

"Sorry," I said, reminded of *my* Alzheimer's-addled mother, tended to by the Stokley clan back East. She always believed in me, offered encouragement to flee the Rust Belt and follow my star. *"You are my brightest child, Timmy, the one who doesn't belong here."* She even understood my need for reinvention, that little Timmy Stokley, caterpillar from Ashton, Ohio, had to emerge from the So Cal chrysalis as Tim Wolfe, screenwriter.

I felt guilty about Mom getting sick, but couldn't help her until I was back in the chips. I hadn't penned a hit in the six years since my Oscar-nominated script for *Teenage Wasteland,* and the Hollywood suits had written me off like a bad debt. Only a home run could get me back in the game, and now fate had delivered Camera Guy to my door.

"Never liked my mother," he was confessing. "But going home for the funeral seemed important."

"Sure."

"I booked a flight, but blew the money Cal wired me before picking up the ticket."

"On that?" I pointed to the Nikon.

"No, I've always had cameras, my armor against the world's unending bullshit. Words can be spun to serve any lie, Tim, but pictures tell the truth."

Toil in Hollywood and you quickly learn that film is the most convincing friend a lie ever had. My enthusiasm ebbed as I real-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ized no streetwise wisdom would be forthcoming. Jay Max was just another deluded schlub, but I couldn't dismiss him just yet, not with any chance that the rough ore of his life could be mined for fictive gold.

"So what's with the cops?" I asked, steering him back toward the plot. "And why Boston?"

Jay glanced down at his camera, stroked the lens. "You got me in trouble again, huh? But then the truth usually does." His head snapped up suddenly, hazy eyes coming into sharp focus. "They need to bury the truth, Tim, and me along with it. That's why the wanted poster's at the post office."

"You're starting to lose me, Jay. What wanted poster?"

"People think they don't have them at the post office anymore, but people just have lazy eyes. The posters are still there, tacked to corner bulletin boards, taped here and there among the long rows of boxes. . . ."

Jeez, I thought, he rambles more than *me*. "A wanted poster of who?"

"A very bad man, charged with terrorism and plotting to overthrow the U.S. government. Funny." Jay laughed, a jagged titter that sounded like he was about to vomit up broken glass.

"Yeah, terrorism is a scream."

"No, funny because the picture was of me."

"Oh-kay." Realizing that I was jawing with a full-blown paranoid, I made sure the door was still cracked open, line of retreat clear should Jay's cork pop completely. "But of course you're not guilty."

Again he surveyed the street behind us. "No, but plenty of bogus evidence has doubtless been cooked up to prove otherwise."

"Sure," I agreed.

"The real evidence is here." He patted the film canisters in his pocket. "It'll disappear, unless I can get it into the right hands. I was calling an old friend who maybe could help, a police captain in Boston."

"Try him again," I said, offering the phone.

"My old man was a spook years ago, CIA, before joining the family banking biz," Jay said, words rushing out of him now. "He drank when Mom was away, told enough stories for me to know the Company's involved in this somehow. Well, I'll show 'em." He grinned, a slash of yellow teeth. "I'll call their worst enemy."

"Osama?"

"No," he said, hitting 411 again, "the FBI."

Jay asked to be connected to the *Federales* in D.C., and I wondered if J. Edgar's ghost, flitting through the Hoover building in a slip, would peg Camera Guy as just another screw-loose subversive, or something more. Rare clay, perhaps, like Lee Oswald or Jim Jones . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Shit. Three rings, then it disconnected. Should have known they'd be monitoring my calls."

"Really?" Willing to play along up to a point, I now had to pose the obvious question. "How could they know you'd call from *my* phone? They use remote viewing or what?"

"Naw." Jay waved away occult suggestions. "They have my voice print, so simply auto-scan all telecom for a match, then pull the plug."

"Uh-huh." Why argue? When cornered by logic, a paranoid drops through a mental trap door, parachuting safely to la-la land below. So much for a plausible thriller. *Camera Guy* would have to be played for yucks.

"*You* call them." Jay thrust the phone at me. "It's my only chance to slip under the radar. Make the call, Tim, please."

And say what? *"Hi, Tim Wolfe here, Oscar-nominated screenwriter, please hold for a real wingnut."* Nope. Time to wrap the scene.

Thanks for the inspiration, Jay, but I'd take over now; I was already mentally casting Crispin Glover or Johnny Depp as my Jay Max McBum. Camera Guy's fantasy would be morphed into my own.

"You made your calls," I said, snatching the phone back before delivering bad news. "But I have my own problems, and if Big Brother's after you, Jay, there's nothing I can do."

"Yeah, that's right," he conceded, even while deflating before my eyes.

Pity the poor bastard for pinning his hopes on *me.* I've failed everyone who ever needed me, right? Just ask my family or any ex-girlfriend.

"Sorry," I said.

"Be true, Tim." With that, Jay turned and started down the stairs.

"Good luck." I should have quizzed him about what was on his film, but no matter. I'd have fresher ideas than whatever Jay claimed about Area 51 or George W. plotting 9/11 with his Saudi paymasters.

Back inside, I considered jotting some notes, but I was tired and the soft mattress beckoned. Let the encounter percolate, I decided, and had just hit the sack when I remembered my Mustang.

Dashing back out to the patio, I saw that the car was untouched, but Jay was lingering below, over by the hedge bordering the driveway. Jesus, I help the guy out and he repays me by pissing on my doorstep?

"Hey!" I shouted. "Get moving or *I'll* call the cops!"

Jay fled up the block, started across the street toward the Nap Time Inn. Suddenly a cop car and a black sedan squealed up, converging on him from opposite directions. He didn't resist as a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

beefy cop threw him into the sedan, which sped away as I watched, agog.

Beefy Cop surveyed the area. I ducked inside before he turned my way and stood with my back to the door, heart racing. Jay had found the cops, all right, but it wasn't his pal from Boston.

What if Camera Guy really *was* a terrorist, some sun-addled So Cal Unabomber? Gripped by the notion, I raced to the computer. A quick Google established the existence of a Marshall clan in Boston, brought to these shores in 1710 by a Welsh merchant, whose son made a fortune slave-trading and later signed the Declaration of Independence. The current patriarch, Regis Welbourne Marshall, had indeed been CIA back in the 'sixties. And yes, a Jay Maxwell Marshall was grudgingly acknowledged, a stunted limb on a family tree of go-getters. Jay *had* been a news photographer for Reuters in the early 'nineties, before quitting and dropping out of sight.

This was *it,* I realized excitedly, the rich seed of a story I'd been rooting for these long, fallow months. Two pots of coffee and a pack of Marlboros later, I'd hammered out twenty pages of character notes, plot ideas, questions begging answers, like just who Jay Max was running from. Jihadist sleeper cells or soulless corporate assassins?

I'd need input from Sal. It was his job to know what baddies were in vogue, but I figured *Camera Guy* could be tarted up any way the suits wanted, because the soul of the thing felt real and righteous.

It would be the saga of a wilted Flower Child, the last innocent, who stumbled across Hard Truth and is compelled to shout it to the world. Of course, the Powers That Be then move to crush him because the last thing *they* want trumpeted on CNN 24/7 is the goddamned truth.

Hours flew by as I synched with my muse in the white-hot act of creation. Finally taking a break around eight, I went out for some Jack Daniels, which, coupled with the last of the coke I'd been hoarding, kept me writing until two A.M. Staggering to bed, I dropped into the deep, contented sleep of an artist inspired.

Up at noon, I refueled on java and red-penciled last night's output. As expected, two of every three pages were dross—unraveling plot threads, pulpy dialogue, cardboard supporting characters. Birthing art is a painful, messy business, and I soldiered on undeterred, separating the pages into a big stack for the dumpster and twelve precious pages of the good stuff.

I left a message for Sal, then my growling stomach reminded me that I hadn't eaten in twenty-four hours. Totino's party pizza in the oven, I grabbed the *Union Trib* off the porch and settled on the couch. Normally, the short item in the Metro section wouldn't have rated a glance, but I'd already crossed some unmapped border, leaving *normal* far behind.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAN KILLED ON FREEWAY

San Diego police report the hit-and-run death of an unidentified man in Mission Valley. The apparently homeless victim, estimated between 45 and 60 years old, was killed late last night while attempting to cross I-8.

The paper slipped from my grasp as I was struck by the awful feeling that the dead man was Jay. I knew him to be enjoying the hospitality of San Diego's finest, but a sense of certainty washed over me like a voodoo tide.

"No," I muttered, "I don't believe in psychic flashes." Only one way to find out. I called the cops and posed as Jay's brother, inquiring about bail, then spent ten minutes on hold before the desk sergeant informed me that there was no arrest record for a Jay Maxwell Marshall.

Stunned, I blurted out that Jay might be their hit-and-run victim. At this, the cop perked up and started quizzing *me.*

I banged the phone down and marched to the kitchen to down the last blast of whiskey. It restored my reason. Odd, intuitive insights are part of life; only the superstitious read them as bulletins from above. Yet wasn't such a reading just what the script needed? Only if I could capture Jay's madness, distill it down to its essence, would *Camera Guy* become something special.

I wrote all afternoon, words rushing forth from some place beyond me—more stenography than straining after art. I timelined the history of my fictive Marshall clan; conjured *femmes fatales* to tempt Jay, villains to bedevil him.

Finally taking a break at five-thirty, I went out for cigs and whiskey, then it was time to eat again. Ramen noodles, with local TV news on the side. A vacuous blonde reported an updated death toll from the St. Louis bombing, then her Ken-doll cohort had news of our hit-and-run.

" . . . Jay Maxwell, fifty-two, son of wealthy Boston philanthropist Regis Maxwell."

Shit.

I upped the volume, but the anchors were now chuckling over a snowboarding cat. Clicking off the tube, I rubbed my throbbing temples and puzzled over my prophetic flash.

Think, Tim! Sketch scenarios but stick to reality. After grilling him, the cops must have released him to wander to his doom out on the freeway. Sure, that had to be it.

The phone rang, further jangling my nerves. I grabbed it and barked hello, but there was nothing but a dial tone. Jay claimed the bad guys tapped his every call, and he'd used my phone twice, so if they'd been monitoring him . . .

"No," I said with deliberate calm, "there isn't any *they.* Jay was a kook, probably wanted for scrawling graffiti with his own shit."

He was also dead now, leaving me to turn his life into fiction.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That was reality, and I refused to be spooked by a strange coincidence or a dial tone. Still, I'd been cooped up for days, and needed light and space before disappearing up my own rectum.

I put the Mustang's top down and headed to the beach, the cool breeze quickly clearing my head. A little panic attack was a good thing. It suited the material. To capture Jay, I had to walk a mile in his orange Converses. Artists *should* flirt with madness, just don't invite it to sleep over.

Everything came into focus as I reached OB: *Teenage Wasteland* had been a smash indie hit because audiences are suckers for unvarnished truth, and that was the exact element all my work since had lacked. I'd unconsciously yoked myself to an assembly line as rigid as any in the Rust Belt, churning out popcorn instead of daring the high wire of genuine art. The suits aren't the only ones hypnotized by dollar signs.

Camera Guy scared me, both Jay's reality and my fiction, but maybe fear was the only inoculation against hackdom. . . .

A wailing siren behind me scattered my thoughts. Shit, I was fifteen over the limit, with a cop car growing in the rearview. Don't hit the brakes, just ease off the gas and be cool. Yet my whiskey breath would be reason enough to spirit me away, like Jay, and what if he'd fingered me? The cops would never buy my ignorance; their unanswered questions would eventually be punctuated by rabbit punches and the rubber hose. Maybe a cheap flight to Guantanamo.

Sorry, Mom. I was going to come and get you soon. Really.

The cop blew by without a glance. Laughing hysterically, I pulled over and sparked a cig with trembling hands. Jay, you really got under my skin.

I'd planned to stroll on the beach, but after parking in the lot by the sea wall, I beelined up Newport Avenue to the Black Cat Lounge. I ordered a whiskey and absently studied the twenty-something tourists telling too-loud jokes and eyeing potential hookups with desire.

My desire, I realized, was to get back to work. On my way out of the bar, I noticed an older, crew-cut ex-jock hunkered in a booth by the door. He followed me out of the bar and stayed half a block behind, glancing in shop windows, eyeing girls, conspicuously *not* seeming to follow me, which made me suspect that he was.

At the parking lot, I passed by my Mustang and sat on the sea wall. Crewcut was in the same lot. He climbed into a black sedan and motored away.

Coincidence, had to be. I refused to check the rearview all the way home. I wrote until midnight, then drank myself to sleep and was back at work when Sal called around noon with a job offer.

"Fifty K, Tim-boy, *if* you can inject some yucks into *Deuce Bigalow 4—Bangkok Pool Boy.*"

My refusal left Sal speechless, and I used that rare silence to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pitch *Camera Guy.* Waxing eloquent, I convinced him that this was *the* project to jump-start my career. He wanted a synopsis by Friday and promised to fast-track a pitch meeting if the pages captured the passion I'd just poured into his ear.

With fresh enthusiasm, I returned to the keyboard and . . . nothing. Jay's story must end with him broken on the freeway, but where to begin? After twenty minutes staring at a blank screen, I headed out for a stroll, brainstorming into my mini-recorder.

"Camera Guy, scene one. We open with . . ."

Halfway down the stairs, my eyes tracked to a black sedan parked directly across the street. I hesitated only an instant before marching boldly down the driveway.

The sedan sped away.

I lifted the recorder, shaking as I dictated. "Opening shot, exterior: black car outside the beachfront youth hostel where Jay's staying. He emerges holding hands with Maria—Latin, busty, half his age—and we hear *click, click, click* as they're photographed from the car."

Jay (VO)

Words lie, pictures tell the truth. Once upon a time, my pictures did, in newspapers worldwide. Then infotainment ate the news biz and I quit looking for truth through a viewfinder. All I wanted that sunny San Diego day was to get to know Maria, but old, ugly truths were about to come looking for me.

Yes, my opening! I raced back upstairs, back to work. Maria ditches Jay for a surfer. Back at the hostel, a note slipped under Jay's door alludes to an Iraqi village, a place he could never forget, no matter how deep the bottle.

Montage of stills: Jay snapping pix in desert fatigues and gas mask; stark B&W shots of corpses frozen in bloated agony, victims of an unknown biochemical horror.

Jay (VO)

During the Gulf War, I was among a handful of reporters who slipped away from their handlers and went out hunting the real story. I never learned the name of that village, which, officially, never existed.

Quick scenes: Jay flagging down an American patrol; overnighting his film to Reuters; buttonholing various brass and getting the brushoff. When his pix haven't hit the wire in forty-eight hours, Jay calls his editor and learns the film never arrived. "This one," the normally fearless editor whispers, "this one we have to let go."

So Camera Guy quits. Snippets of Jay slugging booze in Kuwait City, burning his press credentials, pitching his camera off a hotel balcony.

Jesus, this is good. . . .

Damn, the phone again. Ignore it. No, it might be Sal. I marched out and snatched the receiver. "Yeah?"

Dead air, not even a dial tone this time.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cursing, I went to peek out the front door. No black sedans, just a Pac Bell truck across the street. That made sense. Trouble on the line, so they were here to fix it. If anyone was screwing with my phone, they wouldn't advertise it so blatantly.

Unless they—*they* didn't exist, of course, this was Jay's POV—wanted me to know I was under the microscope. Turn up the heat and perhaps I'd bolt, leading them to whatever they feared Jay had handed off to me before they snatched him.

Good script element, but of course I knew nothing, had done nothing wrong. But then neither had the Iraqis in that village.

I worked till dusk, then swilled enough hooch to nod off in the living room as Warren Zevon howled from my ancient turntable about lawyers, guns, and money.

The week passed in a blur, most waking hours spent polishing the synopsis and blasting through a first draft of the script. Jay's note-under-the-door pen pal is revealed as ex-spook Sophia Summers—hot but mature, a Michelle Pfeiffer or Sigourney Weaver—who'd been in Iraq in '91 and was likewise haunted by the dead village that didn't exist.

They join forces on a frantic cross-country odyssey for evidence, falling for each other while remaining one step ahead of the baddies.

When I finished the day's writing, I'd hit the bottle and let my subconscious take over, jotting paranoid notes and bloody parables as they popped into my head, straining to reach *further* in my pursuit of Jay.

My work was interrupted by sudden, at-any-hour racket from the new tenant downstairs: power tools whining, inane sitcoms blaring, weird squeals of electronic feedback.

Other strange happenings: All my houseplants wilted one night, perhaps shriveled by the ear-piercing feedback. The phantom phone calls continued sporadically, until I finally unplugged the phone.

Then last night, returning from a booze run, I sensed that something was *off* as soon as I walked in. Nothing was missing, nothing out of place, but I couldn't shake the feeling that someone had been in the apartment.

Well, screw 'em, so long as they didn't impede the work.

Sal loved the synopsis and, true to his word, had three pitches scheduled for next week, so I'd drive up to L.A. on Monday.

Knowing *Camera Guy* was the best thing I'd ever done kept me content. Drinking like a fish, hardly eating, worried that I'd either been infected by Jay's madness or really was under surveillance, but content nonetheless. Finishing the script would exorcise both Jay's ghost and my three years of Hollywood exile.

Such was my upbeat mood this bright Saturday morning. I had finished the script last night. My Jay Max was real, his story compelling, and while it lacked some still-elusive something that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would lift it from cash-register-jingling commerce to lasting art, I knew the missing ingredient would come.

Neither Jay nor I would settle for less.

I'd continued researching the Marshalls, a clan that required toning down to make them believable as fiction. Jay's dad remained a rake at 78, golfing with ex-Presidents and shagging socialites half his age. He'd been such a good spook that no records of his CIA service had ever emerged from the vaults at Langley.

Two interesting items *were* documented: Jay's dad paid Bill Casey a hospital visit the day before the CIA director died during the Iran-Contra scandal, and Regis Marshall had been in Dallas "visiting friends" on November 22, 1963.

Before her recent death, Jay's mom had turned a blind eye to her husband's philandering by turning to drink, charity, and Catholic mysticism. Jay's siblings headed foundations and edited literary magazines, prayed with Billy Graham and partied in Monte Carlo, opined on cable news shows and got away with murder in Tijuana whorehouses.

Only Jay had lived off-screen, largely invisible, leaving me to invent him by draping his shroud around my muse. My Camera Guy was a Quixote in khaki shorts, roughed up by life, but still expecting truth to triumph.

The rapid-fire plot worked fine, but crafting a good thriller wasn't enough; I had to seamlessly weave Jay's personal odyssey into the larger tale. So get your ass back to work, Tim.

No sooner had I settled at my desk when the phone rang. The phone I'd unplugged days ago. . . . My heart skipped, but then I remembered that Wednesday night, well into my cups, I'd decided to plug the phone back in. That I only vaguely recalled doing so was a testament to how hard I'd been boozing.

"This is Tim."

"Your mother died last night," said a soft female voice, then hung up.

Dropping the receiver, I stared numbly out the living-room window. Mom was only seventy, losing her marbles, sure, but healthy as an ox. I was planning to bring her to Cali soon, get her around-the-clock care . . .

Cold cig pasted between my lips, I grabbed the phone and dialed my big sister Ellen, back in Ohio.

" . . . number has been disconnected."

Impossible. Ellen was the responsible one. She'd lived in the same house for twenty years and paid her bills two months in advance. Three more dials got the same result, so I tried Aunt Sophie.

" . . . disconnected."

Working through my phone book, I grew frantic as every call failed to ring through.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Tim Stokley no longer exists," a voice whispered in my ear. "Maybe when you erased him, your family was erased as well."

"Shut up!" I barked, recognizing the voice as Jay's. "And I talked to Ellen at Christmas, so she definitely *does* exist, unlike you. You're dead, remember?"

"I was. You resurrected me."

Our imaginary exchange was interrupted by music erupting from downstairs. The new neighbor again, blaring thrash-metal at ear-bleeding volume.

"Okay, that's enough!" Storming out of the apartment and down the stairs, I was ready to tear Noisy Neighbor a new one, but as I barged through the door into the first-floor's common kitchen, the music stopped.

"Play your tunes that loud again," I shouted, marching back to the last studio unit, "and I call the landlord, understand?"

Silence.

"You hear me?"

Nothing. I rapped on the door, which hadn't been shut completely and now snicked open. "Listen," I called through the crack, "other people live here."

Still nothing, so I nudged the door open. The apartment was empty. I went in and looked around. Nail holes in the walls had been patched, but not repainted. Turning the faucet in the tiny bathroom produced only a belch of air. The room was vacant, but damn it, the noise had come from *here,* directly below my bedroom.

"Forget it, Tim," Camera Guy said. "They're just screwing with you."

Wrong. I'd been screwing with myself, dancing out on a tightrope because the script demanded it. But unlike Jay, *I* had a grip on reality and could return to solid earth whenever I chose.

Camera Guy's ghost had yielded its secrets. Time for Jay to get along to his final reward, and for me to get up the I-5 to Hollywood and reclaim my career.

This notion calmed me, but when I turned to leave I saw a poster tacked to the inside of the door. **WANTED FOR TREASON** shouted a six-inch headline, but the figure in the poster below had been cut out. I gawked at it for a moment, then raced through the kitchen and out the door.

A flash of yellow caught my eye, dangling from the hedge. I walked over to where Jay had stood a week ago today and saw that it was a strip of police tape. It was a sunny afternoon, but suddenly I was shivering, pulse hammering like a meth freak's.

"You can flirt with madness," I reminded myself in a whisper, "as long as you keep sight of the difference between truth and fiction. And the truth is that Mom isn't dead and nobody's after me."

I'd wound myself up like a spring. It was time to split for L.A., but not just yet.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Crouching down, I poked around the roots of the hedge until my fingers brushed cool plastic. Three film canisters that Jay had stashed there before I shooed him into the arms of the law.

As I gingerly extracted the film cans, leery of their toxic truth, a car alarm began blaring up at the motel. Jumping to my feet, I sensed a target on my back, but there were no black sedans in sight.

Not yet.

I stashed the film in the Mustang's trunk, then raced upstairs to the apartment. Shut down the computer, grabbed a suitcase and threw in clothes, smokes, toiletries. The script and all my notes went into a leather shoulder bag, then this first load was deposited in the Mustang's backseat.

The car alarm was still screaming as I returned for the computer and a final look around. I stalked from room to room, fretting over forgetting something important, then the idea hit me.

Dino, my beat-poetry-loving drinking buddy, was the assistant manager at a Fast-Foto in Mission Valley. A finger-walk through the Yellow Pages and—thankfully—this call rang through.

Dino promised to have the film developed in fifty-nine minutes or less, per the Fast-Foto pledge. I made him swear not to wander out to toke up, then dropped the phone and split.

The freeway was less than a hundred yards from my door. I'd be at Fast-Foto within minutes, drop the film, then call Sal and let him know I was on the way.

Damn it! The on-ramp was blocked off for the goddamned San Diego marathon. No choice but to continue on toward Sea World, away from my destination. The next ramp was also closed and, caught in weekend tourist traffic, it took fifteen minutes just to reverse course and head back toward Sports Arena. Frantic now, like a rat in a maze, I needed to get off the road, get a grip, and plot an alternate route to Mission Valley.

One of my watering holes was dead ahead. Wheeling into Hoby's Hideaway, I grabbed my bag and darted inside. Ordered and downed a whiskey, then took out the script, flipped toward the end, and read:

EXT: A freight train speeding across the plains beneath an inky, ominous sky.

INT: Jay huddled in a boxcar, arms around the sleeping Sophia.

Jay (VO)

The train carries us east, toward a safe-deposit box in Boston, the key to which hangs around my neck on a knotted shoelace, eighteen inches of cotton that I used to strangle a man last night. A man I thought was my friend . . .

"'Nother shot?"

"No," I told the barkeep, tucking the script away. No time to ride the rails with Jay when I needed to get moving myself. Fishing for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cash, I heard a voice say, "Scotch. The oldest you've got."

It was Crewcut, the guy who'd shadowed me at Ocean Beach the other night. My stomach clenched with fear, and I knew how Jay must have felt when the cops squealed up beside him.

Then I thought of *my* Camera Guy, roaring east in a boxcar with Sophia. Maybe they didn't have a chance, but by God they were going to go down fighting. Resolving to do the same, I eased off the stool and made for the Men's. Once out of Crewcut's sight, I raced down the hall and burst through the fire exit. With the alarm wailing, I sprinted around the building, leapt into the Mustang, and squealed away just as Crewcut ran out of the bar.

Evasive maneuvers for a dozen blocks, with no sign of a tail. Confident that I'd given him the slip, I detoured around the marathon and finally reached the freeway. Just as I was merging into traffic, a minivan swerved into my lane. Mashing the brakes, I cranked the wheel hard right, and skidded across the shoulder to slam into the guardrail. The impact whipped me forward but, belted in, I was okay except for feeling like I'd been belted by Mike Tyson.

Turbo-charged by adrenaline, I leapt out of the car and saw that the Mustang had blown a tire and wasn't going anywhere. I shouldered my bag, retrieved the film from the trunk, then vaulted the guardrail and scrambled up the embankment to the access road.

Fifteen minutes later, I was in Old Town, hiking back toward my neighborhood with no real destination, just knowing that I had to keep moving. Scared and shaking as the adrenaline drained away, I also felt oddly alive, an underdog hero drawing strength from the script slung over my shoulder. *Camera Guy* was my Excalibur, the One Ring, and if I could elude the dragnet, I might yet triumph in the final reel.

Out of smokes and figuring I'd need cash, I found a mini-mall ATM, but was so frazzled that I punched in my PIN wrong twice in a row and the damned machine swallowed my card just as a black sedan with opaque windows emerged from the Burger King drive-thru.

I scurried around a grease monkey and waited behind a dumpster until I was convinced I hadn't been spotted. They were closing in now, so I stuck to alleys, desperate to avoid the black sedans that now patrolled every street. Moving in the general direction of my apartment, I no longer felt like a hero destined for happy endings. More like a hunted animal, defenseless, barely able to flash a fang.

Seeking refuge, I scaled the chain-link fence around an auto junkyard. I rooted through glove boxes and found half a pack of ancient Chesterfields. Rationing each precious puff, I settled in the bed of a mangled pickup and considered my options.

Once it was dark, I'd make for the post office up on Midway, where a machine processed mail 24/7. Top priority was getting

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Camera Guy on the way to Sal, *then* I'd worry about making my escape. Nothing heroic about that, just a calculated shot at posterity. A hundred years from now, people will still be watching *Citizen Kane* and *The Godfather.* It was ego unbound, sure, but *Camera Guy* aspired to such august company. As for Tim Wolfe? I'd either gone completely bugshit, or was about to be swallowed up by something I couldn't begin to understand.

"Or maybe," Jay Max whispered in my ear, "it's both."

"Maybe," I agreed, then fished out the recorder to dictate script notes, editing and casting ideas, stuff the suits always ignore. No matter. The script was the real deal, and it made me proud.

I waited until dusk, then scrabbled back over the fence and started toward the post office. The trek took well over an hour as I moved cautiously, darting from shadow to shadow. They might get me eventually but not, I vowed, before *Camera Guy* was on its way to Sal.

The post office was deserted when I arrived. Hurry, Timmy, hurry! I scribbled Sal's address on a Priority Mail envelope, tucked everything inside, and prayed the machine would take my Visa.

It seemed an eternity, waiting for that stamp to spit out, but then it was in my hands, affixed to the envelope and deposited in the box. *Camera Guy* was now secure in the labyrinthine bowels of the United States Postal Service.

Sighing with relief, I started down the long, dim corridor, eyeing each indented cubby of P.O. boxes for lurking assassins. Halfway to the exit, something taped up in one of the nooks caught my attention. It was a wanted poster, just as Jay had claimed, picturing one Harold Hawkins, a redneck abortion bomber. The next poster wasn't relegated to the shadows, but was prominently displayed on the inside of the plate-glass exit door.

The fugitive was me.

Not lingering to read the charges, I fled into the night, gnashing my teeth to keep from screaming.

"*Now* do you believe me?" Jay asked.

I didn't answer, saving every breath for my flight down Midway, away from that foul, false indictment. Ten huffing-puffing minutes later, I stumbled into a bus stop and dropped on the bench, sweaty and sucking air.

"You can't run fast enough," Jay said. "Or far enough."

I clutched my aching sides. I knew he was right—knew a black sedan would squeal up to the curb any second and it would all be over. Then a question struck me like a thunderbolt.

Why aren't they here already?

No comeback from Jay, so I got up and staggered on, trying to puzzle this out. The bad guys had always been one step ahead, taunting me all week, forcing me off the road en route to Fast-Foto, slapping up that wanted poster they knew I'd see.

Why all the cat and mouse, when they could have scooped me up

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whenever they wanted? Maybe the fact that I was still at large meant that they didn't want *me* at all. With Jay eliminated, maybe all they wanted was his film. Give it to them, I reasoned, and just *maybe* they'd leave me alone.

Infused with new energy by this stay-of-execution hope, I marched right down the sidewalk, no longer cowering at the sound of every car. Reaching my apartment unmolested, I hesitated briefly, then crossed myself and went inside.

No cargo net dropped from the ceiling, but I wasn't anxious to linger and quickly scribbled a note explaining that I'd found the film cans just hours ago.

I've no idea what's on the film, no desire to know. In fact, there never was any film. No oddball with a camera at my door . . .

I put the note on the living-room floor, under the film cans, then I was out the door and away. But to where, with no wheels and forty bucks in my pocket?

I'd have to go Greyhound. Take the bus, and leave the fleeing to them. The station was downtown, a good five miles distant. Hitching was out; I wasn't going anywhere *near* a freeway on foot, so I steeled myself for the long march.

Three hours to reach the station. A skinny young nurse passed me on the sidewalk, snapping her cell phone shut. I turned and eyed her, knowing that if I could just reach Sal, he'd help arrange transportation or wire me some cash.

"Miss!" I called, trotting after her.

"Sorry," the angel of mercy declared, tucking her purse firmly under one arm. "I can't spare anything, not with my kid's tuition."

"I don't want money," I promised, pointing at her RAZR phone. "But one quick phone call could save my life."

As she gave me the once-over, I realized that I hadn't shaved or changed clothes in days.

"Sorry," she decided. "But I'm late."

"But if I can just reach Sal," I pleaded, "I might slip under the radar."

I watched her hurry away, then entered the station and asked for a ticket on the next bus leaving. Didn't ask where it was going, and the cashier didn't tell me.

The bus is an hour or so east of San Diego as I write this. Don't know the exact time because my watch stopped at five minutes to midnight. There's less than a dozen other passengers on board, so I'm probably safe now, unless the large black woman reading her Bible six rows up is waiting for me to doze off before slipping a curare-tipped knitting needle out of her purse.

But I don't think so. I think they *let* me run, so the odds are good I'll get off this bus somewhere in Nevada or Utah or Colorado. What then for Mary Stokley's bright boy and, more importantly, what fate awaits *Camera Guy*? Shutting my eyes, I picture Sal at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Oscar podium, golden totem in hand.

Sal

My heart tells me that Tim Wolfe is out there somewhere, watching this with a smile. Wherever you are, Tim, this is for you!

Stabbing a Marlboro between my lips, I flip a notebook page and scribble:

Alternate Ending:

Tight closeup of a dusty, yellowing Priority Mail envelope, abandoned on a bottom shelf. The camera pulls up and away, revealing that the envelope sits in the very last aisle of a dead-letter depository the size of Penn Station.

And every couple of years, Sal stirs from troubled sleep, long past midnight, to briefly wonder whatever happened to that unreliable asshole, Tim Wolfe.

Sal (VO)

Like a son that one, before he almost cratered my career by no-showing some studio bigwigs. What gall, and after I'd moved heaven and earth to promote the ungrateful little prick!

Wherever you are, Tim, I hope you get the cancer.

I'm doodling on the notebook cover—wheels within wheels—when Bible Woman finally reaches up and clicks off the light. The dark bus rolls on in silence.

I wait five minutes, then retreat to the tiny restroom. The neon light flickers as I study a gaunt face in the scarred metal mirror. The dark eyes are haunted, sunken and bloodshot. The left one has developed a tic.

"Who are you?" I whisper.

Camera Guy suggested that Timmy Stokley was erased years ago, while "Tim Wolfe" was never more than a name scrolling by on a screen, unseen by an audience already halfway to the lobby.

So who's left in the mirror? Some homeless bum, soon to be pushing a shopping cart, or found dead along a stretch of rural blacktop?

Maybe.

My life's been abandoned, left behind with a desperate note and two cans of film, their unviewed images dangerous enough to kill for.

But Jay Max *was* nuts, right? Maybe his viewfinder framed nothing more dangerous than herds of Disneyland tourists. And maybe doors without peepholes are a *good* thing, keeping voyeurs like me ignorant of all the scary monsters lurking on the other side, just waiting to be invited in.

Maybe.

But I still haven't learned my lesson, not really. As I lean back and shut my eyes, the old curiosity starts to gnaw, an incurable itch under my skin.

With a long night ahead, I'm left to ponder that third can of film, tucked deep in the pocket of my jeans, bound for points east and unknown.●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Ron Bucalo

PARSON PENNYWICK AND THE WHIRLIGIG

by Amy Myers

"Music, Mr. Primrose, if you please," roared Squire Holby, and our village fiddler seized his instrument. "Parson Pennywick, lead the way."

I obeyed all too eagerly and hastened out of the house to the lawns of Diplock Hall. It was a pretty sight that summer evening, with lamps already flickering even though it was not yet dark. The lawns were to be our dancing floor, and the scythes and rollers had clearly been busy that day to make them so smooth.

Our squire has regular Evenings of Conviviality, as he calls them, but tonight's was of greater importance than usual. His generosity is well known in our Kentish village of Cuckoo Lees. His jovial figure brings cheer where there was gloom, he has a heart for the misfortunes of others, and his tables groan with splendid food . . . no wonder, for his cook is sister to my own housekeeper, my dear Dorcas.

©2007 by Amy Myers

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nevertheless, I feared that conviviality had now vanished from the evening. Despite the squire's valiant attempt to mend fences, they were already smashed beyond hope of recovery, and I worried about what the evening might still bring.

"I'll send a gig for you, Caleb," the squire had said to me after matins on Sunday last, when I had hesitated over the invitation. Riding home over our uneven country paths after one of Squire's gatherings holds little pleasure for elderly parsons of fifty years and more, especially one whose horse has grown old with him. "What?" he continued, as he saw my doubt, "Not have the parson present to hear my Evelina betrothed to young Mr. Dacres of Ten Trees? Zounds, man, unthinkable."

Some Amy Myers fans may be unaware that she also writes as Harriet Hudson, a pseudonym she reserves for sagas and historical fiction. Of course, many of her Amy Myers mysteries—like this one—also have historical settings. Ms. Myers has two new books coming out in the U.S. this year: *Murder and the Golden Goblet* (Severn House) and *Tom Wasp and the Murdered Stunner* (Tekno Books). ✝

For the said parson, it had also been unthinkable that the lovely Evelina might be leaving Diplock Hall and Cuckoo Lees. I had known her all her life, and the sight of her in the spring of life cheered any day. As the years pass and one's own spring is far behind, one needs such reminders of youth. Then I had reproached myself for selfishness. Ten Trees lies but in the next parish, although it is not one of my own five benefices.

But Thomas Dacres? I had heard nothing against the young man, nor his father William, a solid enough gentleman of great wealth. But Thomas's mother, a lady known for her kind heart, died some years ago, and when William remarried it was not wisely. It was said that riches alone had been Constance Dacres's reason for marrying the ageing widower.

I had reluctantly agreed to attend this evening, but asked doubtfully: "Do you think the marriage will take place, Squire?"

Squire Holby came straight to the point. "That witch interferes over my dead body. William Dacres has sanctioned the match, and even she cannot gainsay that."

"That Constance Dacres is a witch, I do not doubt," I replied, "but only through her power over men's baser desires."

The squire grew purple—with rage, I then thought. "She's an evil wanton, and there's plenty in Cuckoo Lees who'd agree with me. But as for this marriage, it should suit her well. Her power over William will be complete when Thomas leaves Ten Trees for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Weldon House." This was a delightful but small house, he explained, on the Ten Trees estate.

"And that is Thomas's property?"

The squire looked uneasy. "It will be on his marriage, as will a large settlement from his mother. I'll not be able to do the same by Evelina, more's the pity. Of course, Weldon House . . ."

"Yes, Squire?" I urged him when he paused. I feared there was worse to come.

There was. "My Evelina said the witch—I crave your pardon, Caleb—Mrs. Dacres would have the Widow Paxton live there to rid her from Ten Trees. The house is small, however, and would not house three."

I was aghast. The Widow Paxton was the first Mrs. Dacres's mother, of whom William Dacres was very fond. She is an old lady, not long for this world, and needed the comfort of Ten Trees. "But you have William's blessing for the marriage?" I said firmly.

"I do, and—" the squire regained his usual optimistic joviality—"never fear over Constance Dacres. Who could not love my Evelina?"

Tonight, I fear, the answer had become all too clear.

Before leaving for Diplock Hall, I had dined lightly at four on a stew of carp, a veal pie, and a lemon syllabub, as the invitation had been for seven o'clock. Wine and ramequins of cheese were served as we arrived, for supper would not be for some two hours. We were thus a merry group of some twenty to thirty souls at this informal gathering of friends, although I noticed that Mr. and Mrs. William Dacres were not yet present. Dogs ran to sniff each new arrival, Mrs. Holby's pet cat watched the proceedings from the safety of a cabinet top, and even a parrot was heard to squawk his approval at the jollity. I had begun to relax, convincing myself that the Dacreses were absent through some trivial happening. The squire had had the happy notion of sending for the village fiddler to play for dancing; his son came too, trundling a music box so that we should not lack for rhythm if Mr. Primose momentarily ceased for a glass of the squire's brandy. Of which there was plenty!

"Miss Evelina," I had remarked in admiration, "you are tonic enough for us all."

"Even better than rhubarb, Parson?" she teased me, since my faith in this curative is well known. She was clad in a silk gown of the palest pink, with matching petticoat. A blushing Thomas was at her side, as pink as her robe, with his hair drawn back, quite in the mode. No wigs for the young of today, not even a peruke. For all that, he was a fine-looking lad, and I wished her well, assuming then that Constance, as well as William, had given them her blessing, even if a reluctant one on her part.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

How could I have been so naive? William and Constance Dacres had just arrived. It was William I saw first, as the doors to the dining room opened. A quiet, solemn man, tonight he looked unhappy and strained. Then I saw the tall, slender figure of his wife at his side, who smiled as graciously as if she, and not Evelina, were the centre of today's rejoicing. Her dress proclaimed it, too. None of our country styles here. No quilted padded skirts for Mrs. Dacres. That striped brocade gown and jacket seized the eye with their apparent simplicity, but like their wearer they were, as Dorcas would no doubt have told me, most artfully conceived.

Thomas had turned white, and so I swear did half of the gentlemen in the room, and not with admiration for Constance Dacres's undoubted beauty. William Dacres must surely already have been well aware of his wife's flouting of the requirement for fidelity in marriage. Dorcas told me that her current paramour was rumoured to be Mr. Christopher Collett, a learned and most serious young lawyer, and present this evening. He is married to a lady somewhat older than himself who has brought riches to the union. His predecessor in Mrs. Dacres's "favours" was also present, Mr. Gerald Farrow, of prosperous estate and recently married to a young and pretty wife, Emily. I feared what might lie ahead. At court in London, such matters are managed—or dismissed—with more aplomb than in our little community in Cuckoo Lees.

It is difficult even now to explain what made Constance's beauty seem as hard as the ice of winter. When I thought of the first Mrs. Dacres, I wept for what was gone and for the foolishness of men such as William who seek too quickly to replace what can never be replaced and thus fall victim to the outward show.

"So I am to have a stepdaughter." She spoke seductively and I thought all was well as she inspected Evelina from head to toe. The unlucky girl gracefully sank to the floor in a curtsey. As she rose, however, Mrs. Dacres rapped out:

"I think not."

"Mrs. Dacres!" her husband pleaded. "I pray you, not here."

"And why not? It cannot be. Thomas is underage, and that is that. I am sure you would agree, Squire Holby." The gentleness in the voice gave way to iron.

The squire grew purple in the face. "My daughter, ma'am, is worthy of the Prince of Wales himself."

"Then let him have her."

At this breach of courtesy, let alone justice, I waited for her husband to step forward to stop such outrageousness, and declare that Thomas had his permission to wed. To my distress and alarm, neither he nor anyone else spoke; not Thomas, not the squire. It was up to me, their parson, to speak out. I approached the witch myself, fervently wishing I had thought to pack bell, book, and candle in the gig.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Madam, if you have just cause to speak out against this marriage, then tell us now, or let your husband speak for you."

"Against this marriage?" Her laughter rippled out. "Parson, he is but twenty years old. To come into his inheritance from his mother, he requires his father's permission to wed. And that he does not have."

"Egad, is this true, sir?" the squire thundered at William Dacres. I saw him flush, I saw him step forward as though he would speak, then I saw him stare as if bewitched by his wife, as no doubt he was.

"Perhaps it is best . . ." He could not finish or even look at his son.

Constance laughed. "Five years, Thomas, until you are twenty-five. It will pass quickly enough."

Thomas looked at her, and I saw hatred in his eyes. I am ashamed to say it occurred to me that perhaps the witch had flaunted herself at him, only for Thomas to reject her.

"And in the meanwhile," she continued, not laughing now, "take care, all of you. Many gentlemen who are here tonight shall rue the day they met me, and some, Parson, will look to their livelihood."

I was in no doubt that this was a direct threat against myself, as well as others. There was much at stake, and not only for myself. To keep its secrets, in which the squire and I are heavily involved, Cuckoo Lees depends on trust between one and another and seldom is there a cuckoo in the nest. Whatever the risk, however, this cuckoo had to be ousted. I could hear uneasy murmurings of "witch," I could see fear on many faces. I am not a brave man, but I stood there to represent a far greater being than myself, and He will not be browbeaten.

Without ado, I stepped in front of Mrs. Dacres and took Miss Evelina's silk-gloved hand gently in mine. Then I took Thomas's in my other hand and joined them together with mine clasped over them.

There was total hush. "Whom God wishes to join together," I declared quietly, "let no man put asunder."

A tense silence, and then a roar of approval and relief from the assembled guests. Squire Holby took his cue from me.

"Music, Mr. Primrose, if you please," he had roared, and our Evening of Conviviality staggered into life again as we hurried towards the lawns.

The rowdiness and exuberance of the dancers was unexpectedly all the greater in the face of the threat to it. We danced most energetically, we laughed, we joked, we swung our partners with enthusiasm, the squire's dogs ran amongst us, barking with excitement as though they would join in, serving men dexterously wove their way through to bring drinks, and the fiddler played as though Rome itself burned. The minuet, even a quadrille, we attacked all the familiar dances with gusto, if not grace, for lawns

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

are more suited to the old country dances, from The Chirping of the Lark to The Parson's Farewell—often demanded by the squire as a jest against me.

Only Mrs. Dacres did not join in, but watched from the doorway to the house. I saw no one approach her, perhaps because no one wished to dance with her; not even her husband had requested that dubious pleasure. I thought little of it. We would dance, at nine we would take supper, and in my delight at dancing with Miss Evelina herself, I half forgot Mrs. Dacres, assuming in my foolish arrogance that I had saved the evening and the marriage.

"And now the finishing dance," roared Squire Holby, as nine o'clock struck and the smell of hot dishes of supper began to waft out to us. He was well in his cups by now and who could blame him? "What shall it be?" he demanded.

There was only one answer. At Diplock Hall, there was only one finishing dance permitted. With one voice we all cried out: "Sir Roger de Coverley."

What other country dance could be better to seal an evening of bonhomie? Who could not but remain in good humour with his neighbours after dizzily whirling round with nimble feet and swinging his partner with joyous zest? Who could not but be merry as coats and skirts flew and ankles peeped?

It is thought by some that the dance is named after the jovial and eccentric "Sir Roger de Coverley" who, over sixty years ago, was created in Joseph Addison's essays for *The Spectator* magazine. History prefers to complicate matters, however. In the essays, "Sir Roger" claimed it was his grandfather invented the dance, but the "Roger of Coverley" existed in the dance manuals long before "Sir Roger" willy-nilly became confused with the story, although its figures and steps continually change over the years.

To my mind, it is still the finest country dance of them all, and it is said even the court of King George enjoys it. When my dear wife Bertha was alive I loved to swing her round, then pass round each lady in the whirligig (as Bertha used to call it to my amusement), as she did the same down the gentlemen's line. How I enjoyed taking her hand to turn in the centre each time, until the last couple in the set was reached and we paused to lead the promenade back to our new positions.

I had thought Bertha would be my partner for life until she was gently taken from me, and now I live on without her, working in my parish, in my garden, and on my glebe land, which my man Barnabas manages, and cared for by Dorcas, my housekeeper, who comforts me by day, and often also when darkness falls.

Our sets were six couples in length, and to my horror I saw the squire, no doubt even further in his cups, escorting Constance Dacres to join the head of one set. To my amazement, William Dacres was next to the squire in the gentlemen's line, opposite his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

partner Mrs. Meek, our doctor's wife. Next to his father was Thomas Dacres, not to be parted from his Evelina. Thus the family seemed reunited. Then came Christopher Collett, no doubt bitterly regretting having been drawn into Constance's spider's web, opposite his wife; then came Gerald Farrow, no doubt shivering in his shoes at the prospect of revelations about his past indiscretion. His wife Emily faced him, but next to her at the end of the set on the ladies' side, I saw to my consternation that the Widow Paxton stood awaiting a partner. Much against my will, since I had no wish to meet Constance Dacres in a merry dance, I realised I should in courtesy take my place as the widow's partner.

At least the music would, I trusted, concentrate the dancers' minds on their feet and not on Mrs. Dacres's threats, since it is a fast-moving dance in which wits and limbs must move quickly together. Then I remembered that only some of the dancers at any one time would be moving quickly, and that for the other couples there would be time to brood on Mrs. Dacres, while waiting for her and the squire to perform the whirligig down the line towards them.

There would be no trouble, I tried to comfort myself. The squire would have his position as our magistrate to consider, as I had my parson's office. Mr. Primrose began the well-known tune, which set all our feet a-tapping, and for a while I forgot my worries.

"Tallyho," roared Squire Holby as he honoured his partner—which must have been hard for him today—at the top of our set. As the unfortunate gentleman at the bottom of the set, I advanced to take the hand of Constance Dacres in the middle of the set; it felt for a moment like a snake curling in my palm as we circled round. Then I was back in my place, only to have to advance thus thrice more, until I was released by the advent of the whirligig figure. As she laughed and twinkled in merriment at me, she seemed a different woman from the one who had opposed me in the dining room, and yet each time I escaped the witch to retreat to my own position a great relief flooded over me.

I watched her with her partner the squire, turning with their right hands in the middle of the set, then she passed to the gentlemen's side for the whirligig and he to the ladies'. First in line was her husband:

"Come, my dear," I heard her say. "Is this not a splendid dance?"

William Dacres did not reply, but stolidly turned with her in her wake after she passed on his left and then danced to the centre to meet the squire again. Then to young Thomas: I saw him shrink away as she quietly spoke into his ear while circling round him. Back to the centre again to take the squire's right hand. Impossible now to look at that innocent-looking face and believe she had wickedness in her heart.

"Christopher," she cried gaily as she circled round him, "how long a while since I have seen thee last."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

His terrified expression, as he turned and for a moment was facing me, told me all I wished to know. Back to the centre for Constance Dacres. Then the next gentleman in the whirligig:

"Gerald," she said loudly, "have you not missed me?"

I did not see his face as he turned, close as he was to me, but I could imagine it. Back to the centre and the squire's right hand. She would be with me in less time than it takes to think these words, let alone record them. I drew on all my resolve. I was a man of God, His cross would protect me against the deeds of the devil. And here she was, those eyes staring expressionless into mine.

"Parson Pennywick," she began, but did not continue, to my relief. She seemed still as we circled together, a ghost in flight as she went to take the squire's hand for the last spin of the whirligig. They half-turned, leaving her to dance on past the Widow Paxton to take her place in the line next to her, as the squire came to stand by me. It was time for them to begin the promenade.

It did not happen. Instead:

"Oh," the Widow Paxton screamed, as Mrs. Dacres staggered, clutching at the widow's skirts; but then her hands fell away, as she collapsed on the grass.

"She swoons," I cried, but there was no movement, no sound from anyone, and the fiddler played on.

Then Dr. Meek came hurrying from the other set, and the music came to a screeching halt, as it was observed that we had all stopped dancing. I was already at Mrs. Dacres's side when Dr. Meek arrived. Why? I think I knew even then that this was no mere swoon.

"She has no need of your services, Caleb," Dr. Meek said, after a quick examination, but even so I knelt by the body for a few words with the One who alone knows the secrets of the most evil of our hearts.

The doctor had spoken quietly, but even so William Dacres heard. He was pale with shock, but I heard no outburst of lamentations either from him or those now gathered around.

I was aware that Squire Holby was staring at me enigmatically. "Get her inside, Caleb," he said. "We must send our guests away."

"Not for the moment, sir," Dr. Meek said.

Squire Holby is our magistrate, but poaching and charge-orders on men unwilling to wed the mothers of the children they have sired are the worst of the crimes usually tried before him. Even so, he grasped the doctor's meaning, and quickly ushered the guests into supper.

"An apoplexy," he cried dismissively. I longed to believe it.

Warm food provides a licence to believe that nothing can be amiss with life, and I had a brief wistful desire to join the diners. Then I apologised to our Lord for such sinful thoughts while a woman lay dead for an unknown reason, awaiting His and my attention. As I looked down at that still-lovely face, now pale in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

death, I lamented the abuse she had heaped upon God's gifts. We carried her inside to the powder room, and left Dr. Meek for a while to decide how she had died. The coroner must be informed if there were no clear reason for it.

The squire, William Dacres, and I went not to the dining room, dearly though I would have liked to. I thought longingly of the happy winter evenings I had spent here at the squire's fireside eating his good victuals and basking in his good cheer, but now I entered dark territory at Diplock Hall. We went instead to his breakfast room, where the servants obligingly brought us some sustenance. Much as I welcomed it, it tasted of little while we waited for news. At last Dr. Meek rejoined us, but it was to ask only me to accompany him, not the squire or William.

"Deuced odd," I heard the squire say to William as we left.

I thought so too, and foreboding returned as I followed the doctor back to the powder room.

"I had thought it heart disease," Dr. Meek said gravely.

He is a youngish man, but I have great faith in him, albeit he is not such a believer in the old country cures as I am. Young men bring new ways with them.

"Until I saw this," the doctor continued.

The clothing had been loosened now, but was still in place. All I saw at first was a spot of blood underneath the left breast. Then I realised that what I had taken for a design on the dress was in fact a round object sticking out from it. As Dr. Meek pulled it clear, out came darkened blood upon it. The instrument was something I recognised with shock.

"A stiletto," Dr. Meek confirmed.

This was not in its usual sense of a dagger, but the so-named instrument women use in their needlework to create such holes as eyelets; it is long, strong—and, I presumed, lethal, if it struck the heart. I have seen my housekeeper stab at coarse cloths with hers often enough.

"She was unfortunate," he continued. "It went between the bone struts of her stays and found its target."

A silence, as I wrestled with my conscience. "So she was murdered, Doctor," I said at last.

"This is a woman's tool. Could a woman have killed her?"

Rapidly, I thought of the Sir Roger de Coverley, and those who had met her in the whirligig while she progressed down the set. It would take no great force to drive the stiletto in, but I saw no chance of a woman having had the opportunity to kill Mrs. Dacres, nor indeed any of the men without great risk. And yet, Constance Dacres had been moving from enemy to enemy on the men's side. The womenfolk opposite might have had little love for Constance Dacres, but would lack the opportunity.

"Any man could have brought such an object if he had decided to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kill Mrs. Dacres in advance. He could wait for an opportunity to arise in the crowds where many might be suspect," I said unhappily. "What easier weapon to obtain and conceal unnoticed in hand or clothing. Nevertheless," I felt obliged to point out, "she fell at the *end* of the whirligig." I could have added, "where I stood," but it was obvious enough.

"She might not have died instantly," Dr. Meek said. "I have heard of several cases of delayed death where the victim kept moving without difficulty for some little while."

"She would have made some sign, cried out, even if all she felt was the pain of entry."

Dr. Meek considered this. "The dance is fast, and hardly quiet."

He was right. The Sir Roger de Coverley is usually a cheerful dance. The cries of "Hey!" were many as the dancers twirled and spun, and there was much laughter, too. A murderer could easily have covered any cry from Mrs. Dacres with one of his own.

"She could not have been stabbed before she joined the set," I said. "There would have been too great a risk while she stood alone at the doorway, and yet surely I would have seen if she had been stabbed in the line."

Or would that be so? I then wondered. As the squire and Mrs. Dacres made their way down the set through and around the other couples, those gentlemen who had not yet "met" the lady would be watching the one in front, whose back (since he and the lady would pass on each other's left) might mask movements from those watching behind. Those who had already "met" the lady would not be watching her progress down the rest of the line of gentlemen, but the ladies' side, as the squire made his way down the set. Yes, it might have been possible, I conceded.

"We must inform the coroner," Dr. Meek declared.

"First the squire and the lady's husband," I reminded him.

We decided in this awkward situation that, having done so, I should remain with the squire, and Dr. Meek return to the dining room with William Dacres to inform the company of what was going on. I needed to talk to the squire in private.

Once the news was imparted to Squire Holby, there was, as I expected, an appalled silence. Then: "What," he enquired, "the devil do we do, Caleb?"

Crime in Cuckoo Lees is a matter for careful consideration, as the village runs on well-oiled and accepted lines. Our unpaid parish constable, Samuel Byward, is hardly equipped to judge a murder, only to deliver the presumed guilty party to prison through the magistrate in order to await trial at the Assizes. Alternatively, a Bow Street Runner may be sent for to discover the miscreant. There is a drawback to this apparently simple solution: He would be an outsider, and as a result, other secrets in Cuckoo

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lees could face the unwelcome light of day.

Such as the smuggling arrangements for our tea, brandy, tobacco, and other such essential comforts of life.

Cuckoo Lees lies near the smuggling route from the coast at Hythe to London, and, as has every other village, possesses its own organisation to deal with the goods. This organisation must therefore have its leaders. Obviously I cannot reveal the identity of our captain, but there is a stalwart lieutenant and his second in command.

These are respectively myself and the squire.

Somehow Mrs. Constance Dacres had discovered this, as had been evident from her threat to me. Our position was therefore very delicate, particularly since the squire is also our magistrate. We have our own enemies in Cuckoo Lees, but even they draw the line at bringing in the law from outside. But what should we do now?

"We have no choice," Squire Holby said gruffly. "We must solve this affair ourselves, send for Samuel and notify the coroner; then put the villain behind bars."

I agreed, with only one reservation, but this time it was I who had no choice. "You'll forgive me, Squire, but we're in too fine a pickle here."

Rather to my surprise, he glared at me, but took my point. Not only might he be prejudiced in the matter, but I might myself, so we sent for the doctor and William Dacres again and candidly explained our dilemma. Since most people, poor and rich, benefit from our activities, we had a sympathetic audience. Nevertheless, I was aware that William Dacres would appear to have every reason to wish his wife dead, as would his son.

"What about me?" William asked. He stared down at the body of his wife, and still I saw no emotion there, though this was a woman he had held in his arms and loved enough to marry. "She cuckolded me, made me a laughing stock, and would have ruined my son's happiness too. You'll think it strange the power she held over me, but you didn't know her as I did. It was as if she sucked the life blood from me, everything that made me a man. I'd say that makes me prejudiced, too."

"*I'm* not prejudiced," Dr. Meek pointed out.

"How do we know?" William growled. "No, there's only one person I'd trust. The parson can find out who did this."

Three pairs of eyes rested on me thankfully when I reluctantly nodded. "But with your assistance, Squire," said I. The stakes were high. If I failed, the parsonage, Dorcas, Barnabas, and my whole peaceful life would be forfeit.

The body of Constance Dacres was a grim reminder that time was short. Once the guests dispersed, there would be no solving of the crime amongst ourselves. Early in the evening we had been merry with wine and brandy, but now our minds were sobered with the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

responsibility before us. I allowed myself one brief image of my quiet study at the parsonage and Dorcas sitting there with her sewing. That brought unwelcome thoughts of the stiletto, so I hastily changed it to her baking a tench pie.

The squire and I had a brief word alone in order to agree our way forward. I began the task with a final plea: "Squire, you're a magistrate. Are you sure—"

"No, Caleb. This is your game of chess, and you must win it."

And so I began. "You were her partner, Squire Holby. Tell me how that came about."

"That devil woman," he grunted, "came up to me and told me it was my duty to dance with her. I thought she'd be less trouble there than left on her own."

"It seems unlikely that she could have been harmed during the early stages of the dance," I began.

He avoided my eye, naturally enough. I had been the person dancing with her. "I agree," he said, fortunately.

"Did you notice anything strange as you turned her at the end of the whirligig?"

"The what?"

Somewhat sheepishly, I explained Bertha's quaint term.

"Can't say I did," the squire replied to my question. "She wasn't speaking, but I took that as natural in the circumstances."

I was no further forward. The answer to who killed her must lie in the Sir Roger de Coverley, and the old dance was laughing at me. "Very well, Squire. We must dance it again."

He gaped at me and I explained my reasoning. "Dr. Meek can play the part of Mrs. Dacres."

The squire made no objection to this eccentricity of mine. The rest of the guests could be jurors if they chose, but the greatest Judge of all would be on my side, and I trusted in Him that together we might reach the answer.

It was with some difficulty that I managed to reassemble the set, but I had my way. There are advantages in being considered an eccentric elderly parson. Owing to the squire's excellent stock of brandy, Mr. Primrose was beyond accompanying us on the fiddle but his son nobly wound the music box and its raucous sound sufficed to convey the speed at which we had danced, despite the toll it took on my nerves and ears.

I watched carefully as Dr. Meek ("Mrs. Dacres") took his place. In other less desperate circumstances I would have chuckled to see our serious young doctor honouring the squire with a curtsey. I carried out with straight face the early figures of the dance, feeling somewhat foolish stepping out with the doctor. However, when, as Mrs. Dacres, Dr. Meek approached the line of gentlemen in the whirligig, I asked another gentleman to stand in for me while I took an outsider's view.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As I watched "Mrs. Dacres" approach I realised to my dismay that I had been mistaken. A strong lunge with a stiletto as she passed her enemy could hardly have escaped notice were it delivered by William or Thomas Dacres, Mr. Collett or Mr. Farrow—or even myself. Nor could it have been achieved when she approached the squire for the turns by the right hand. I was relieved that the squire was formally ruled out. He could in no way have delivered that blow to her far side without being seen.

"Do you have the truth of it yet, Parson?" the squire called out hopefully.

"No."

"But it couldn't have been me. You agree?"

"I do."

The squire looked mightily relieved. The same went for William, Thomas, Christopher Collett, and Gerald Farrow. "None of them could use a right hand to inflict a blow on the far side of her body," I declared.

"Now, see here," the squire began grandly, addressing the company at large, "you all heard Parson say I couldn't have done it, even though Mrs. Dacres threatened my Evelina. There's more, though. She threatened me tonight. Said she had others here, too." He coughed in a meaningful way. "She held us in the palm of her hand, she said. That's you, Mr. Collett, and you, Mr. Farrow, and I, all in the same whirligig, as Parson would say. All *lies,*" he said firmly, as Mrs. Collett and Mrs. Farrow showed signs of swooning, and their husbands looked as scared as smugglers caught by the Preventive. I almost clapped, so sensible was the squire's move.

"That woman," the squire informed the company, "threatened to tell Mrs. Holby I'd been tumbling her in the hay. Mrs. Dacres, that is. I can tumble Mrs. Holby all I like."

"And had you—er—tumbled her?" Mr. Collett asked faintly.

"Zounds, sir, no." The squire glared. "No more than you or Mr. Farrow had. But who'd believe us if she'd sworn to it?"

A silence while Messrs. Collett and Farrow obviously realised with relief that they were neatly absolved from their sins, past and current. Except perhaps, I reminded myself, of murder.

"What's more," the squire continued, "she said she'd tell Mrs. Holby this, unless I refused to sanction the marriage between these two young people. I don't mind admitting it would have thrown the fox among the chickens, all right, if she'd poisoned Mrs. Holby's thoughts against me. But now the parson's showed I couldn't have killed her."

I sighed. "You couldn't, Squire. Nor could a right-handed man in the line during the whirligig. But for a left-handed man it would be different, because the action would be masked from the rear by the gentleman's body, and from those ahead or opposite by Mrs. Dacres as she continued her turn to the left around the gentle-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

man." I paused. "Are any of you left-handed?"

There was, not unexpectedly, an instant chorus of denials. "It can easily be ascertained," I pointed out.

"Do so," barked the squire. Pen and paper was instantly brought, and each wrote with his left hand. There was no doubt. They were all right-handed.

So, wearily now, we performed the dance yet again, myself included. I was too old for more than one such dance in an evening, and I grew heartily sick of Sir Roger's music. I was beginning to think I must have done the murder myself in a fit of absentmindedness, but then at last I saw how Mrs. Dacres had died.

I took my colleagues aside, explained, and with sadness in our hearts we summoned the murderer into an adjoining room.

"Widow Paxton," I said, much grieved, "it was you, was it not, who slid that stiletto into Constance Dacres?"

"It was." She did not flinch. "And mighty grateful you all should be to me. Someone had to do it. She was ruining William's life, and Thomas's, not to mention those of others. Such as mine. She wanted to throw me out of Ten Trees. So I thought, I'm not long for this world. I have a canker that grows the size of an apple. I took the stiletto in case I saw a chance this evening to take her with me after one last great dance."

"It was murder," I told her gravely.

"Killing a mad cat. How did you know it was me?"

"We ruled out all the women because Mrs. Dacres wasn't close enough to them. I forgot that after the last turn with the squire in the centre she would have to pass the last lady in line closely on the left side to get into the correct position to face her partner in the gentlemen's line again. No one would have seen you turn towards her as she did so. No one would have seen you stab her."

She cackled. "I'm left-handed, as it happens. Even easier."

"But," I continued, still puzzled, "you were already in place when you saw her coming to join the set. Suppose she had not danced?"

"I arranged that," she answered with dignity. "I told her the squire was lusting after her and wanted to dance with her. He wouldn't make so much ado about Thomas and Evelina then. I knew Squire always had Sir Roger to end with."

I was thankful I was but a lawyer in this matter, and that our Lord would be judging her sooner than any assize. This dance of life brings strange whirligigs, and as I returned to the parsonage that evening, my heart leapt to see the light still burning. Dorcas awaited me.

"How was the Sir Roger de Coverley?" she asked me eagerly.

She would know the terrible truth soon enough, but I would not spoil our dreams this evening. Dorcas could not perceive the ambiguity of my words. "As usual," I said. "The best of all finishing dances."●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A Cozy for the Jack-O'-Lanterns

by James Powell

When she'd gouged out their eyes, Kate O'Lantern dropped the peeled potatoes into the water in the iron pot. They settled on the bottom, staring up at her like the ghosts of pumpkin children. Kate saw her own reflection, too, her hollowed-out head worn witch-wise with the stem pointing forward above the saddest of smiles. She began to cry again and turned away to mourn for her murdered husband.

Author of some 150 short stories of a mysterious and humorous sort, James Powell is one of our most valued contributors. Elements of fantasy occur in his tales, but always in the context of a mystery—often, as here, a whodunit. His stories have appeared in *Best Detective Stories of the Year* and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror.* ¶

The small basement window over the sink framed the Halloween night. It was always Halloween in Shocksville out Gourd County way. Pumpkins grinned from every porch, all cats were black, belfries scattered their bats across the yellow moon, and the town's young witches flew among them, using their binder-twined corn-sheaf bodies for broomsticks. Once Kate had flown up there, too, before Jack, her scarecrow husband, took her to their wedding bed. And now he was dead.

An hour ago she'd brought mulled cider up to his third-floor office: a mug for Jack, another for Sam Spook, the private eye and pest exterminator. (Most townies held two jobs. Kate was witch and boardinghouse keeper. Jack was scarecrow and taught high school history.)

Alarmed by the locked door and the smell of burnt pumpkin juice through the open transom, Kate used her key to get in. She found Jack lying across the desk, his pumpkin head broken into large pieces, the candle stub inside extinguished but still warm. Papers burned in the fireplace.

In tears, she phoned the town constable and went back down to

©2007 by James Powell

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

buzz him in. (All Shocksville had installed these buzzers after a magic-spell overload crashed the witch-hazel hedgerow that kept the Outside out. The few minutes it was down allowed an aluminum-siding salesman who took a wrong exit off the freeway to find them. His going door-to-door terrorized many until the ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties who clerked at the local Things-That-Go-Bump-in-the-Night-R-Us store ran him off. Shocksville had been having terrible dreams ever since.)

Constable Hubbard arrived promptly. A tall many-sheaved young man with a badly carved face set low on a knobby dark-green head, he'd pinned his tin badge up high, perhaps in the hope people would mistake his steep forehead for a bobby helmet.

Kate led the way upstairs, explaining how she'd found Jack's body and about his visitor. The O'Lanterns had run into Sam Spook, all trenchcoat and fedora, at that morning's walkabout, when the whole town turned out to visit and chat while their corn sheaves swept the sidewalks clean. Jack had asked him to look into their bat problem. But Spook said he was too busy hunting the Phantom Sapsucker.

For several springs now, someone had earned that nickname at maple-sugar time by raiding the sap buckets in the surrounding woods. Last year outraged farmers armed with torches and pitchforks had marched through town. (At first everyone thought the Living Dead were making another demonstration for a living wage.) The farmers demanded the thief face rural justice, a punishment involving harrows, balers, and pigsties. Then they marched out again, leaving the sidewalks filthy with tracked-in mud and manure. The town quickly posted a hefty reward for the Phantom Sapsucker, dead or alive.

Then, as Jack and Kate were strolling away, Spook reconsidered. "Hey, bats in your attic, you say? Maybe I'll drop by later." And he did.

"But Spook'd left before you brought up the cider?" asked Hubbard.

"I guess," said Kate uncertainly. "Can't say I heard him go. I usually do. The front door closes hard."

She left Hubbard to examine the crime scene. Visiting her boarders, she told them her sad news and, as Hubbard requested, asked them to assemble in the kitchen. Then she returned to her potatoes. Dead husband or not, boarders had to be fed.

Kate was determined that Jack's killer would be brought to justice, so she resolved to keep her eyes open and her wits about her. She'd known Constable Hubbard since he was a shy little schoolboy. "Poor Doug," the other kids called him. She never knew why. He did his constable job well enough. But a murder investigation was another matter.

Corn sheaves whispered on the kitchen's narrow staircase. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Grim Reaper entered. Repeating his regrets at her loss, he sat down at the table where the boarders ate and leaned on his scythe handle. Shocksville's most famous resident, the Grimmer, as the townies called him, wore a black cloak over his sheaves, its hood pulled far down over a head no one had ever seen. Some even said it wasn't a gourd at all. The Grimmer traveled a lot. The Outside, where he did much of his work, held no fear for him.

"I hate murderers and suicides," he grumbled in a sturdy voice. "You wouldn't believe the forms I have to fill out when people die before their allotted hour."

The Grimmer wasn't a boarder. He'd knocked on the door leading down from the garden while Kate was mulling the cider, come to see Anna Rexia, the musical skeleton who'd moved to town awhile back, renting Kate's second-floor hall closet. Anna and the Grimmer always did a quick run-through of their Dance of Death, the leadoff to Shocksville's Halloween Parade. It was quite a sight, he marching ahead, high-stepping and using his scythe handle like a drum major's baton, she following on a bicycle behind a bass drum which she played with big drumsticks attached to her knees while pounding her various bones with xylophone mallets.

Heel-bone clatter on the stairs announced Anna's arrival. The cornhusk skirt and matching bra she wore for decency's sake made her look like the poster girl for some starving Cannibal Isle. She got right into helping set the table. At Kate's instruction, she added a place for the Grimmer and another for Constable Hubbard, which she put beside her own, eligible bachelors being her hobby.

The doorbell brought Kate to the other basement window. The coroner's people had come to collect Jack's body as Hubbard said they would. She buzzed them in.

With a heavy *clump-clump* Mr. Elmer Tree, who rented her second-floor back, edged himself sideways down the staircase. Blasted by lightning in the forest, Tree'd gone barking mad. When a farmer out for kindling buried an axe in him, Tree fled to town where he shuffled around at night frightening the shrubbery until a wise old owl chose to nest in his hollow trunk, restoring him to his senses. Tree and W. O. Owl owned The Bird and Bough, an English-style pub serving alcoholic spirits.

Owl's big eyes rolled right and left. "Who . . ." he began. Tree completed the question ". . . isn't here?"

Who? Kate turned to take the meatloaf from the brick oven. She didn't care much for her third-floor back boarder, a professor of scarecrow science down from Bogeyman A&M. No corn sheaves or pumpkins for this city gentleman: He wore chinos, tweed jacket with elbow patches, and a feed-sack head all stuffed in the fashionable portly style. His head was decorated with the ears, nose, lips, and hat from a Mr. Potato Head kit.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The meatloaf on a platter, Kate answered the question. "Professor Hayford Strawfoot," she said..

"Call me Spud, dear lady," came a voice on the stairs.

Kate shook her head. She swore the man tiptoed around the house, his big ears cocked, listening for the mention of his name so he could make a grand entrance. Strawfoot and her Jack had been banding crows to collect more data on the professor's new theory of scarecrowery, up for this year's prestigious Cowbell Prize in Agriculture with its million-dollar stipend.

Strawfoot appeared at the bottom of the steps, loose-legged and leaning on a golf putter. He tipped his little bowler hat to the ladies just as the front door slammed and Kate saw the gurney taking Jack's body away.

Shortly after that, Hubbard arrived and she and Anna began putting the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and succotash on the table, and Owl left his hollow nook to perch atop one of Tree's broken limbs so his friend could shovel in the food.

Pulling up his chair, Hubbard saw the Grimmer and gave a start. "Not here in any official capacity, I hope, sir?" he asked. (People got polite when speaking to the Grimmer.)

"Merely a social call," came the reply. "Jack wasn't down in my book for dying today, at least not by accident or natural causes."

Kate and Anna sat down and the meal began. The table ate in silence until Hubbard turned to Kate and asked if Jack had been depressed lately. "I mean, any chance of him standing up, rolling some paper into a tube, sticking one end in his mouth, the other in his nose hole, and blowing his own candle out, smashing his pumpkin on the desk when he fell?"

"He'd been mutter-muttering around about things not adding up," admitted Kate. "But suicide's the coward's way out. Jack came from nobler stock. The O'Lanterns were kings of Ireland."

Modesty prevented Kate from mentioning her own forebears. The Macmalkins of Gray were old vaudevillians, counting among their number the Three Weird Sisters who appeared in command performances before Macbeth himself. Not that they came away much richer for it. The Macmalkins claimed the farthing had been invented so that Macbeth could tip.

"Did Jack have any enemies?" asked Hubbard, turning quickly from Kate to look around the table.

"Well, the crows sure as hell didn't like him," she replied sharply, adding a softer, "My Jack was a friend to all. A Double Boo and licensed to scare anybody he damn well pleased, he saved it all for the crows."

"But, dear lady," insisted Strawfoot, "our figures show Jack's crows always came back. And why not? Raggedy-ass is so yesterday, so unscientific. No way to win a crow's respect. With me, the crows know they're dealing with a serious adversary." He raised a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

glove of limp fingers. "When Strawfoot chases a bird it stays chaste. By which I mean not only do my crows go away and stay away, they get out of the breeding business altogether."

Hubbard broke into the ensuing silence. "Okay, folks, who was the last to see Jack alive?"

When no one volunteered, Anna said, "Maybe me. I noticed one of my bass drumsticks had a loose cover. The big parade was coming up fast. So I went up to borrow Jack's duct tape. He fixed it for me on the spot."

"Was he alone?" asked Hubbard. When she nodded he said, "See anybody in the hall or on the stairs?"

She shook her head. "Only old Grimmer there, waiting by my door when I got back."

While Kate and Anna cleared things away in preparation for dessert, Owl whispered something to Tree, who rose, saying, "Got to take my friend here out for his evening mouse or two." Unbolting the garden door, he added a boarder's savvy, "Save me a piece of the pie, okay?"

When they'd gone, the Grimmer leaned forward and said, "I send a lot of groceries the turkey vultures' way, so they fill me in on the bird-land poop. They tell me the crows got so fed up with Jack running them off they put out a contract on him."

"Could you have misheard, sir?" wondered Strawfoot. "If the crows wanted anybody rubbed out it'd be me. The Strawfoot Method means their total extinction."

"The vultures say otherwise, Spud," insisted the Grimmer. "'Make sure you get Jack,' they say the contract went, 'not the la-di-dah windbag.'" He nodded at the door. "Maybe Owl there's our hit man. He's at the controls of one big piece of heavy equipment. He maneuvers Tree around behind Jack, shifts him into kill drive, and wham-o, Tree clubs Jack with the blunt end of his axe. Then Owl parks Tree out in the hall, locks the door from the inside to make it look like suicide, replaces Jack's key, and flies out the transom. A perfect locked-door murder."

Suddenly Tree burst in through the door with Owl clinging to him, eyes wide with terror. "Who's the body up there?" they demanded.

Armed with candles, the kitchen emptied up into the garden. Between the path and the house they found Sam Spook's body, his head crushed in. Hubbard turned to the Grimmer. "You must've seen him when you arrived, sir."

"Am I a suspect, Constable? I assure you, when it comes to death I only do wholesale. If I didn't see the body, perhaps it wasn't there."

"What the . . .?" said Anna, as people in mystery novels do, picking up a raw parsnip next to the body.

Stepping closer, the Grimmer pulled a heavy wooden mallet out from under the dead private eye. Looking up at the third-floor

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

windows he asked, "Is this the murder weapon? Did Spook kill Jack then fall to his death trying to escape?"

Hubbard collected the parsnip and mallet and herded the others into the house.

But Kate hung back. Something had rolled into the grass when the Grimmer pulled the mallet free. Bending down, she found an apple, a wax apple, *her* wax apple, late of the bowl of artificial fruit on her dining-room table. She recognized it by the two tooth marks in the wax. She'd shown them to Jack to prove they had a fruit-bat problem. Maybe he'd given it to Spook.

With a frown, Kate put the apple in her apron pocket and returned to the kitchen, where Hubbard and Strawfoot were having a heated exchange.

"You make it sound like I creep the halls listening at keyholes," said the professor, shaking a clutch of limp fingers in the constable's face. "I was on my way down the hall to the gents' to wash up before dinner. Through the transom I heard a voice ask Jack's permission to check the attic for the Phantom Sapsucker. Jack said, 'Be my guest, Shamus.' Then I passed out of earshot."

Strawfoot nodded at the parsnip and mallet. "Isn't that how you kill a vampire fruit bat? You catch him sleeping in his lair and all turned back into his human form. Then you drive a parsnip through his heart."

"If so, Spook was playing a dangerous game," said the Grimmer. "Now that there's a reward, the Phantom Sapsucker must be sleeping with one eye open."

"How about this," suggested Strawfoot. "Spook creeps up to the attic, mallet and parsnip at the ready. But the Phantom Sapsucker wakes, grabs the mallet, chases Spook, and slugs him on the stairs. The commotion brings Jack out into the hall. The Phantom Sapsucker strikes him down, too, drags his body back into the office, locks the door, replaces Jack's key, changes into his bat form, and flies out the transom. Back in his human form, he tosses Spook's body, murder weapon and all, out the window."

"Wow," said Anna.

"But why go to all that trouble?" asked Kate.

"To make it look like suicide," said Strawfoot.

Hubbard nodded. "Sounds good. I found fresh pumpkin juice on the attic steps. What say we visit the scene of the crime?"

During the trooping up to the third floor Kate recalled some Shocksville gossip about Hubbard's mother. After five boys, people said, old Mrs. Hubbard had really wanted number six to be a ghoul to follow in her husband's footsteps on the graveyard shift at the cemetery. To help things along, she'd given baby Doug beef tea instead of mother's milk and meaty bones when he was teething. Then one day she went to the cupboard to get her poor Doug a bone. But the cupboard was bare. (Since then, whenever

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

townie talk turned to youth, money, wedded bliss, or other things that seemed to vanish into thin air, they always added, "like old Mrs. Hubbard's bones.")

Another thing. Kate had noticed Hubbard hadn't eaten any meatloaf at dinner, just pushed it around on his plate before burying it under a second helping of mashed potatoes.

Suppose even before he knew how to walk the baby Doug had chosen the vegetarian way, crawled to that cupboard, and hid the bones he so detested. Kate's great-aunt Wichita always held that Shocksville things came with a warp in them. Did that go for vegetarianism, too? Had Hubbard learned the trick of changing himself into a vampire fruit bat to raid local sap buckets, orchards, and the very fruit bowls people used to brighten their dining rooms?

Maybe Hubbard wasn't the killer. But Kate was sure she had in her pocket proof he was the Phantom Sapsucker.

Hubbard yelped on the stairs. "Careful with that scythe, sir," he urged the Grimmer.

In the third-floor hallway Hubbard announced they were going to reenact the crime and began assigning parts. Kate was sure this kind of nonsense would get them nowhere. She cleared her throat. When Hubbard turned, she held up the apple as if to match its tooth marks to his canines.

Hubbard recognized the apple and turned pea-soup green. "Yes, I'm the Phantom Sapsucker," he admitted in a trembling voice. "So I stole some fruit and sugar-maple sap. Hey, I slept in your attic. So put me in jail and throw away the key. But Mrs. O'Lantern, I swear I didn't kill your husband, or Sam Spook either."

Kate knew right then and there that poor Doug Hubbard wasn't the murderer. "I believe you," she said.

The Grimmer agreed. "Your vampire fruit bats are never bloodthirsty."

"Boy, that's a relief!" said Anna. "It's a bummer when the cop's the murderer."

"But if it wasn't Hubbard . . ." asked Tree, ". . . then who?" said Owl.

Kate turned to Strawfoot. "That was some story you came up with about the murder rampage, Spud."

"An educated guess, dear lady."

"You even explained the pumpkin juice on the attic stairs before Constable Hubbard mentioned it," said Kate. "Maybe you knew how it was done because you did it."

"I'm neither bird nor bat," said Strawfoot. "How could I lock the door from the inside and fly out the transom?"

"My great-aunt Wichita used to say people don't look behind a door unless they've stood there themselves," replied Kate. "I don't look behind doors. But I bet if I'd looked behind Jack's I'd have found you staring out at me."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hubbard stepped forward.

"Stop right there, Constable," said Strawfoot. "Arrest me and I'll tell the world you are the Phantom Sapsucker and let rural justice take its hideous course."

With his lower lip atremble, Hubbard threw back his shoulders. "I know my duty," he said. "Professor Hayford Strawfoot, I arrest you for the murder of Jack O'Lantern and Sam Spook."

Tapping Strawfoot with the flat of his scythe, the Grimmer added, "Spud, baby, let's talk moral turpitude here."

"Wow," said Anna.

"You get charged with murder and, convicted or not, you'll lose your academic tenure," said the Grimmer. "I'll see to that." And he could. In addition to his day job, the Grimmer was a trustee at Bogeyman A&M.

Strawfoot's jaw stuffing sagged downward. "But how will I finish my scientific work?" he protested.

"Here's the deal," said the Grimmer. "Plead guilty to the murders. We'll call your piddling leap for gain and glory a crime of passion. You won't hang. The judges always consult with me on death penalties. I can promise you life at the county prison farm. You can continue your scarecrowery studies there."

Strawfoot brightened. "You mean I'd be outstanding in my field again?" He struck a limp but noble pose. "I accept your offer, sir. Perhaps I can atone for my crimes by making the world a better, a crow-free place."

"One more thing, everybody," said the Grimmer, "We've all got to swear not to reveal the Phantom Sapsucker's identity."

"Who . . ." said Owl, ". . . wouldn't?" added Tree.

Anna put her arm in Hubbard's. "A wife can't be made to testify against her husband," she said.

"Of course I'll never tell," said Kate. "As for Strawfoot, my Jack wasn't vindictive. He'd have voted for life on the prison farm, too."

"My lips are sealed," Strawfoot assured everyone.

"Okay," said the Grimmer. "Confession's good for the soul. So let's hear it." He gestured to give the professor the floor.

Strawfoot took a deep breath and began. "Well, after he gave Spook permission to search the attic I heard Jack say he wanted Spook's help to prove I was juggling the numbers in the scarecrow banding.

"Just as I feared, he'd caught on to what I was doing. The banded birds Jack scared away always came back. Mine never did. Why? Because I paid them to take a little vacation at the shore. I even paid Mr. Big, the Crow Magnum himself, to put out a contract on Jack.

"But if Jack was starting to blab, I'd have to do the job myself. And fast. And get Spook, too. Back in my room I watched through a crack in the door until Spook started up the attic stairs. Then I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

came up behind him and put a real dent in his fedora with my trusty putter and pushed him headfirst out the window.

"I hid when Miss Rexia clattered up the stairs. After she left I knocked on Jack's door. I told him I had fresh data for our scarecrow study. He invited me in, never dreaming how far I'd go to win the Cowbell Prize.

"As he sat busily gathering up the papers he'd been showing Spook I stepped around behind him and crushed his head open. I dumped every paper on his desk into the fire, a real messy job because now they were covered with his pumpkin juice. Then I used his key to lock the door so I could make a thorough search for anything else incriminating. Hearing Kate in the hall, I flattened myself against the wall next to the door in case she had a key. I stayed there behind the door until she left. Then I ran to my room."

Strawfoot held out his wrists for Hubbard's handcuffs. "Well, let's get started," he said. "My scientific work can't wait."

Kate lay in bed listening to the distant music as Shocksville's Halloween Parade stepped off. Listening was better than sleep, which, since that damned aluminum-siding salesman, always brought the O'Lanterns the same terrifying dream.

They would be standing together in the doorway on a dark Outside night watching an endless procession of children move along the street and up the walks to the houses and down again. Each child carried her husband's head with an inside light to help it find the way. (Jack had told her how ancient kings made drinking cups from the skulls of their enemies.)

The youngest children came first, costumed as little angels, ballerinas, killer bees, and ladybugs. When they reached the door where the O'Lanterns stood they all said, "Triggertreed" and offered Jack's head for them to drop candy in. The older children followed, cheerleaders, ninja warriors, Spider-Men in several sizes like nesting dolls, lady vampires, zombies, and, finally, coffins and tombstones with legs.

Kate wasn't afraid of the children. It was the guardian creatures hovering all around them, always just beyond the light, who made her tremble. They frightened Jack, too. He said they whispered that they carried destruction in their fingertips. They told Kate they knew the O'Lanterns were not, as the children believed, neighbors dressed up for the occasion. She could tell those ominous dark shapes hated Shocksville even more than Shocksville feared them. She did not know why.

Kate stared up into the darkness, trying to picture the Grimmer and Anna Rexia leading the parade, trying to fight off sleep. Much as she wanted to see the procession of children all carrying her Jack's bright smiling head, she dreaded facing that terrible dream alone.●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PASSPORT TO CRIME

NO BONES ABOUT IT

by Marc R. Soto

Translated from the Spanish by Steven Porter

Irene had one of those insipid and vaguely mouse-like faces you immediately associate with religion teachers and old maids who work in libraries: eyes small and dark, slightly watery, as if they were always about to laugh or cry; lips that pursed outwards from her pointed chin when she smiled; hair, fine and straight, cut in a classic bob; teeth, small and even, with no trace of tobacco or coffee. She didn't have a spectacular figure, nor did she dress in a provocative manner. Everything about her was straight, sober, and calm, like the cloister of a Cistercian monastery.

And in spite of that (or maybe precisely because of it), I fell in love as soon as I saw her in front of me in the queue at Carrefour's checkout number 4 in El Alisal. I remember the number because when I looked at the sign I realised that was exactly the number of months that had passed since, in an uncharacteristic fit of bravery, I chucked Raquel out. We'd been together for almost seven months, three and a half of which had been total hell. She was so damned insecure! Behind every look that someone gave her, there was criticism; behind every gesture, a lie; behind every silence at the dinner table, an infidelity. With her, it was bound to be stormy.

Marc R. Soto was born in Cantabria, in northern Spain, and currently works as a software programmer in Madrid. He uses his spare time to write short stories, and is the winner of several literary awards, including a prize for young talent sponsored by Spain's largest publisher. One collection of his stories is already in print in Spain, and another is scheduled for release later this year. His work has never before appeared in the U.S.

©2007 by Marc R. Soto; translation ©2007 by Steven Porter

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At the end we were falling out on a daily basis, so one day I told her I loved her but we each had to follow our own destinies. It was the most difficult thing I'd ever done in my life, and never had I felt more pride or guilt about anything.

Compared to Raquel, the woman who preceded me in the supermarket queue seemed a nun just out of the convent. She was dressed in a brown skirt that fell a few centimetres below the knee, flat shoes, and a beige jacket over which her hair flowed, revealing the smooth curve of her neck once in a while. There wasn't a great deal in her basket: a lettuce, two tomatoes, and half a dozen apples. It wasn't necessary to look at her ring finger to work out that she was single.

The conveyor belt carried her shopping into the hands of the checkout assistant. Irene (back then, of course, I didn't know her name) paid with a brand-new twenty-euro note, and carrying the bag, walked out with short nervous steps. I remained there, resigned to watching how she moved away while the checkout girl scanned the bar code of my new razor blades and said to me in a professional voice, "Four sixty, sir." I paid, thanked her; she answered, "And thank you," and got on with her own thing.

When I received my change I saw that Irene, oblivious to the stream of people who were coming and going through the mall, had stopped in front of the window of a shoe shop. I wanted to savour her proximity once more, so I decided to pass next to her before leaving. However, just when I was behind her, she turned around, ran into me, and our bags flew into the air.

"Oh, goodness me," she exclaimed, blushing. "Sorry. How clumsy I am!"

I smiled while I helped her pick up the apples, which had scattered all around us.

"It was my fault."

"No, it was me."

And suddenly we burst out laughing: a man and a woman in their thirties laughing like teenagers in front of the window of a shoe shop in a mall. I know that it's difficult to believe, but sometimes things happen like that, as if it were written somewhere, in one of those Norma Seller romantic novels.

Anyway, the thing is, we sat down in a cafe, introduced ourselves, and exchanged telephone numbers. We had a long conversation. She kept tucking a rebellious lock of hair behind her ear while fixing her sparkling little eyes on mine. I reeled off the worst jokes in my repertoire one after the other, and she laughed at each and every one of them. An hour and a half later we said goodbye with two kisses on the cheek that left me keen on a third, and promised to phone each other.

On my way to the car, the fresh air of the parking lot made me think again. I didn't need anybody, thank you very much. After

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

leaving Raquel I had also stopped serving drinks in 7 SINS to concentrate on preparing for the Santander Council entrance exams, as well as on the novel I had been dreaming of since I was seventeen. This was the time when my Casanova lifestyle was to take a U-turn; the last thing I needed was to get embroiled in a relationship. What had occurred in that shopping mall was beautiful and sweet, but superficial, the type of event that tends to get boring when repeated, like a song by Bryan Adams.

With these ideas in mind, I was about to erase Irene's number from the address book of the mobile when, suddenly, I caught myself writing her a text. No sooner had I sent it than the phone vibrated in my hand and the words "You have 1 message" shone on the screen. My heart thumped in my chest. Our messages had crossed in midair. I opened it, answered, she answered me, and we called each other and laughed like two idiots without really knowing what to say, until we finally agreed to see each other the next day.

During the following months we ate lunch together every day, had dinner almost always, and occasionally made love, slowly and without showing off. She gave night classes in a high school and I didn't have any schedule, so we used to spend the mornings and the evenings together, walking through the city.

There were aspects of her that I didn't know about, of course, as well as parts of my life that I tried to avoid. In particular, I never mentioned Raquel or the entrance exams that I was beginning to suspect I would never get through, and she just mentioned Paco, her late husband, in passing until the dinner that I will talk about soon. Irene used to chat about her childhood in Quintanilla del Colmenar, a little village near Palencia that I supposed was made up of a cluster of small adobe houses around a little square with a fountain in the centre, in which the water would certainly freeze in winter. Whereas I spoke to her about the books I had read recently and about those that I was thinking of writing with her by my side. Thinking about it, both are excellent ways for two people to get to know each other.

Sure there were details about Irene that were a little shocking to me, but no one reaches thirty-something without acquiring some quirks. For example, it was strange the way that she tilted her head, as if she was trying to listen to a distant melody that only she could hear, or the way that she sometimes whispered, "What did you say?" when I had been silent. On the whole, though, I took those quirks of hers for little eccentricities, and never gave them a second thought.

Anyway, the months passed and we were still together. The matter seemed serious, so one day I stopped in front of the window of a jeweler and thought, *Why not?* I went in and bought her an engagement ring. With the ring in my pocket, I called her on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mobile and told her to make herself pretty, that I was taking her out to dinner. And I think with that I gave myself away, because when I went to pick her up, she came out of the high school with an impressive black dress adorned with a golden brooch in the shape of a fish.

Nervous as a schoolboy, I parked the car in the city center and took her to a restaurant in calle Rochí. The waiter showed us to our table and left us there, lulled by the sound of the piano, smiling while we toyed with the bread.

After a few minutes, the waiter came to take our order: I chose pepper sirloin steak, and I think she decided on salted bass; as a starter, we shared a salad. We ate the first course barely looking at each other. I had thought about leaving the reason for the dinner until dessert, but when the waiter took away the salad bowl and cleared the table for the main course I felt I couldn't resist any longer, so I put my hand in my trouser pocket where the little box with the ring was. I decided to ask her to marry me at that very moment.

"Wait," Irene stopped me, her voice trembling. I looked up and saw she was pale. The brooch shone coldly on her chest. "There are . . . there are a few things you have to know before . . . well, before whatever it is."

The waiter arrived then with my sirloin steak and her bass. The moment had passed. The magic had disappeared, as if it had been swept away by an icy gust of wind. I took my hand out of my pocket.

"What kind of things?"

Irene shrugged.

"Things, in general. About my husband, mainly. I want you to know that . . ." Irene hesitated ". . . that he'll always be with me. I will never forget him, I mean."

I nodded while taking a mouthful of steak. I thought I understood what it meant to be widowed so young.

"But there are other things you don't know either."

"That doesn't matter, dear," I responded. "We have lots of time ahead of us for—"

"There are some things you might not like."

A shiver ran down my spine. I had never seen her so serious. Her eyes (I think I already mentioned that they always sparkled, as if she was on the verge of laughter) were completely dry. I'm not making it up. They were dry like those of the fish glittering on her chest. I stretched my arm across the table and took her hand. She didn't draw it back, but neither did she turn her hand to take mine, nor did she squeeze my fingers.

"Look, Irene," I said, gulping, "I don't think there's anything about you that could upset me."

"You don't know how Paco died, for example, or where I studied

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

teaching, or—"

"In Valladolid, I suppose, or the Open University."

Irene nodded.

"In the OU, yes. In Soto del Real."

I raised my eyebrows. Irene sighed.

"In a women's prison."

And then she told me how her husband died.

She had met Paco at school, one of these cases that everyone has heard about: the children who are described as partners by their classmates long before they really are, who study together at primary school, grow up together, go out with each other at thirteen, break up for a few months and get back together again, until one day they find themselves holding hands in the doorway of the local church, being showered in handfuls of rice thrown by their friends and relatives. Paco, according to what she said, had studied a module in occupational training (I don't remember exactly whether electrical or mechanical engineering) and he did odd jobs for various local companies.

"He was a perfectionist," those were the words Irene used to describe him, "so he was rapidly promoted." Within a year and a half he was already maintenance supervisor in one of the area's most important factories. He did everything properly and wanted to see everything done properly. A place for everything, and everything in its place, that was his motto.

I don't suppose his workmates were very happy with that motto. Perfectionists—particularly when they are just above you in the pecking order—can make you uncomfortable. It's like having a stone in your shoe, or a few grains of sand in your socks.

"He was a dab hand in the kitchen. He was a better cook than me, I tell you!" continued Irene, letting out a chuckle. "Most of the time, when he was on the morning shift and he arrived home in time to eat, he helped me cook lunch. He was a dear. He always put me right when I made a mistake. Always."

I recall thinking I had known several people just like that in my student days: teachers who want everything done perfectly, with pinpoint accuracy, to their liking; pests that never let you rest until the dissertation is *exactly* the way they want it, with circular diagrams the *exact* colour they and only they can see in their mind and the explanation boxes with their bloody rounded edges. Yes, I had known people like that, but I found it difficult to come around to the idea of what it meant to grow up next to someone of that sort, to spend your *whole life* together with someone like Paco, always criticising you, always having to be right. I knew then the origin of Irene's nervous movements, as if she always feared she was going to be reprimanded, a "That's not the way to do it" shouted from behind her only a second before her husband said to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her, "Bring it here, come on," and took whatever it was out of her hands, to show her the correct way to do it.

"The thing is, I went through a bad time," said Irene after a pause in which she wiped her lips with a napkin, took a sip of wine, and wiped her lips again. "A bad time . . . and I blamed him; it wasn't his fault at all, poor thing. He only wanted to help me do things properly, because I was a bit clumsy and a bit . . . slow. But I thought he was a bad person, you know? And I didn't deserve that kind of treatment from him, you know, always telling me off and all the rest of it. So I killed him."

That's how she said it, all of a sudden, a stream of words (I reckon) she had held back since the moment we met, which I'm sure she held back whenever she met anyone, as if a voice within her said, "Not yet, wait, don't tell him or you'll frighten him, that's not the way to do things, dear, not like that."

When she had finished, she stared at me, her neck drawn in, her lips pursed, her pupils occupying almost the whole iris, as if her whole body complained, saying, "Are you angry? Do you still love me?"

"Did you say that . . . that you killed him?" I stuttered, looking around to make sure that nobody else had heard these words.

Irene nodded, and some look akin to desperation appeared on her face.

"That's why they took me to Soto del Real."

"But how . . . ?"

"I poisoned him."

She poisoned him. The words bounced around my head like Ping-Pong balls: She poisoned him, she poisoned him. . . . According to what she told me next, she had bought rat poison the week before, for no particular reason, simply because the drugstore was having a closing-down sale: two bottles for the price of one. That intervening week, however, prevented her from pleading temporary insanity during the trial. Her husband's murder had been premeditated, said the public prosecutor on the stand; she bought the poison a week before, in the sales, for God's sake.

"I didn't buy it for him. I was thinking of drinking it myself, but then . . ."

Then she thought it would be better if her husband drank it. Her husband, who every time he got home found reason to complain, to reproach her for the slightest thing, to tell her with words bathed in affection that she was useless.

She poisoned him. She dissolved rat poison in the bottle of wine, in the soup pan, in the chicken sauce. She wanted to make certain. Then she went out and left a note for Paco saying that she was off to see her sister, but lunch was in the fridge. She didn't want to be there when he died. She wasn't courageous enough.

Suddenly, the sirloin steak I had been enjoying up to that point

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

no longer appealed to me. I dropped the fork on the edge of the plate and looked at Irene, without knowing for sure if I should believe what she was telling me. She was toying with a bit of fish, slowly breaking it into small pieces. Apart from that, her meal was still intact.

"Those are the things . . ." she began to say, but she looked away, nodded, and then looked at me again. "Well, the things you could find out. Do you still want to be with me?"

How the hell should I know?

We didn't finish the dinner. At least I didn't feel up to it. I paid the bill and we left the restaurant together. It had turned cooler outside. The nights are cold in October. When I felt in my pocket, next to my fingers, the warm bulge of the little box with the ring, I withdrew my hand quickly, as if something had bitten it.

We took a long stroll together to the bay. The tide was high and the waves broke near the pier. The prostitutes had begun their procession through the Jardines de Pereda, but they didn't say anything. If you don't look at them, they don't look at you.

When we reached the Palacete, I turned to gaze at her. Irene was startled, as if she feared I was going to tell her something unpleasant. The sea behind her was an oil slick. Beyond that the lights of Somo and Pedreña twinkled, like gems in a black velvet display stand.

"What did you do next?" I asked finally.

"Next?"

"Yes, next. You went back home? Called the police? What did you do?"

Irene nodded and took a deep breath.

"I went back home."

She went back home, but it wasn't easy. She had spent the evening wandering through the town, feeling that the whole world was watching her. She didn't dare go back, because she didn't know if Paco had eaten the soup and the chicken and drunk the wine that she had left for him, or if, on the contrary, after noticing the meal tasted strange, he had preferred to cook something himself. He was such a good cook!

However, at about nine in the evening she decided to return. She went up the stairs to put the moment off. They lived on the fourth floor; according to her own words, every step was a little Everest. When she got to her door, her hands were shaking so much that she dropped the key ring on the floor twice before she was able to put the key in the lock properly and open it.

"Holy smoke!" exclaimed Irene after a pause. She was scared to death!

She closed the door after her and crossed the hall. She moved

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

forward, all ears. Paco used to eat with the telly on. From the corridor she could hear the newsreader handing over to the weathergirl. She stopped for a few minutes next to the kitchen door, rooted to the wall, listening for the sound of crockery, the noise of plates in the kitchen sink or Paco's groans as he lay dying on the linoleum. After a few minutes in which only the weather forecast broke the silence in the house, she went in.

"He was dead, and the kitchen . . . my God, the kitchen was a mess: plates scattered here and there, a chair overturned, pieces of chicken and noodles all over the place. Paco was in one corner. Fortunately he'd landed facedown, because if I'd seen his features, I : . . I don't know . . ."

A bitter breeze like the sharp edge of a sheet of paper drifted through the bay and Irene shivered. I hesitated for a moment, but finally put my arm around her shoulder. That gesture I had repeated so many times over the last few months gave me the creeps on that occasion. Irene snuggled up to me and put her little head on my shoulder, with that combination of fear and admiration that I had fallen in love with. I turned my face towards her and looked at her, so small, so delicate. Who would have imagined she was a murderer? How can you know what's hidden behind any given face, what's rotting slowly under the gentle reflection of a calm bay?

Shit, who can know the first thing about another person? What other way is there of getting to know her, apart from asking questions until the whole truth comes out?

After all that I couldn't keep my mouth shut. I had to know everything. Beyond a certain point you have to know the details, you have to lift the blanket and look at the corpse, lower the window to pass next to the crashed car that has kept you waiting two hours on the motorway. Beyond a certain point it's no longer possible to change the channel during a *Don't Drink and Drive* advert.

Anyhow, we turned round. We had already reached Cuesta del Gas. Up ahead, Avenida de la Reina Victoria is long and, during the night, lonely. The case of the female teacher murdered there a couple of years before came to mind, so I insisted we go back.

"What did you do when the police arrived?"

But Irene shook her head.

"You didn't call the police?"

Irene shook her head again.

"Christ!"

"I was frightened."

"Frightened of what, for God's sake! He was already dead!"

Irene shrugged.

"I didn't want them telling me off again. The police, just like Paco, just like you now . . ." said Irene. Her bottom lip was trem-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bling. I didn't know whether to make a run for it or console her or . . . well, I didn't know what the hell to do.

"But then, what did you do?"

"Cleaning. I cleaned everything. I mopped and wiped up. I cleared the table and the hob. And when everything was as clean as a new pin, I sat down in the living room and switched on the telly. They were showing that series—I don't remember what it was called—that Emilio Aragón was in. I loved it. I always watched it although Paco thought it was garbage."

I got the impression that this was said with a degree of pride in her voice.

We sat on one of those benches in Castelar that look directly onto the boats rocking in Puerto Chico. The halyards echoed as they rattled on the masts of the sailing boats. I, admittedly, was in a state approaching shock and at that point had decided to accept whatever she said to me. That's why, instead of jumping off the bench and beginning to cry out like a madman because the woman I loved had killed her husband and then sat down to watch *Médico de familia,* a soap opera about a family doctor, I merely asked her if she remembered anything about that day's episode, but she shook her head, pinching her bottom lip with her thumb and the index finger of her right hand.

"No, to be honest, I don't remember what episode it was, but I don't think Emilio Aragón was still with Lydia Bosch, because I'd already seen the installment with the wedding in Soto del Real. I switched on the telly but no, I didn't pay much attention, really. In fact, I was thinking about what to do next.

"Well, in this neighborhood there were many cats, so . . ."

It was an old neighborhood next to an overgrown park. The cats kept the rats under control, that's why the neighbours were delighted with the cats and put out the previous day's leftovers by the doorway for them, in little plastic plates or crumpled-up tinfoil. It was common at five o'clock in the evening to see half a dozen alley cats prowling around the area, waiting for their ration of leftovers. On Boxing Day they had a special menu.

Irene thought it would be a good idea for the cats to eat her husband's remains. Sitting on the sofa in the living room, pinching her bottom lip with her thumb and index finger while she watched the grandfather scold Chechu for lying about the exam results, she decided that the best course of action would be to chop her husband's body into pieces small enough to boil in the pressure cooker, so that the flesh came away from the bone. When she was a little girl she had taken part in the pig slaughter in Quintanilla del Colmenar, so she had some idea about how to chop up meat.

"The problem was, I didn't dare turn him around and look at his face," said Irene with a vacant gaze. "I loved Paco. I didn't under-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stand how I had been able to do that. What could I have been thinking? How was I going to manage to chop him up while he was looking at me? I was desperate!"

However, after a while, a solution occurred to her. Taking advantage of a commercial break, she got up off the sofa and went back to the kitchen. After raking around in one of the drawers, she took out a plastic bag. Once she had put it on her husband's head, she turned the body over. Paco had been sick before he died, and his shirt was a mess, so Irene stripped him and threw the dirty laundry into the washing machine.

"It's better to wash off those stains as soon as possible," she said. "If not, the marks remain."

After putting the washing machine on, she returned to the kitchen. I pictured her then, running about the house with those little steps of hers, short and nervous, without totally realizing the seriousness of what she had done, and what she was about to do. She certainly would have disheveled hair and tension in her face. She said she couldn't find any suitable knives and had to look in her husband's toolbox, but actually I think she was too nervous to see anything except the naked corpse on the floor.

Looking back, in retrospect, I wonder how it is possible that I didn't make a run for it that night. I still had six months ahead of me before the entrance exams were held, enough time to make up the lost hours; and, furthermore, the half-completed draft of the novel I had dreamed of was lying unfinished on my desk. Why did I stay there? I don't know.

To be honest, I felt safe. I listened to Irene coldly and with some scepticism, like the time, at the age of eight, when I listened carefully to the stories of my imaginative twelve-year-old friend telling me at playtime about his adventures as a secret CIA spy: without believing all of them, but savouring the possibility (just the possibility) that they were true.

But with Irene it wasn't the same. We weren't primary-school children, neither of us were kids. I didn't have any reason to doubt what she was telling me except—except the outlandishness of the whole thing, of course. It was all totally absurd, grotesque, like a bad horror film that basically makes you laugh.

Irene, visibly affected, was telling me how she had killed her husband, and I was treating it all like a story, like entertainment, savouring the possibility (just the possibility) that it *wasn't* true.

"Then I took one of Paco's saws and carried it to the kitchen," said Irene, next to me. I looked at her. She was gorgeous under the streetlight.

"What saw?" I asked, going round the bend.

"A big metal one, like this," she replied, drawing a rectangle in the air.

"A hacksaw. It wouldn't have a blade to cut metal, would it?" I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

said, enjoying myself.

"Well, yes, I found that out later, but at that time I didn't know how to use the other handsaw, it had very large teeth! So I picked up the hacksaw and took it to the kitchen."

She kneeled down next to Paco's body, on a folded towel so that she didn't hurt her knees, and began to move the saw over her husband's right arm, at elbow level. The blade sank slowly in, covering everything in blood. She soon began to perspire.

"I, well, I think I was crying, because despite the plastic bag *that* was Paco, you know? I knew every single scar of his, every one of his moles. *It was Paco.* I heard a voice inside me . . . a quiet voice that told me I was doing it wrong, that it was going to be a right mess, that wasn't the way to . . . to chop up a person, that I would have to put a plastic sheet underneath to collect the blood, that, basically, I was a bad wife."

Irene was devastated. I felt sorry for her, and wouldn't deny I felt a bit guilty about putting pressure on her to keep talking. She had probably been in a terrible state that night in the kitchen. Who knows what depths she plummeted to after what she did that day?

"As I was sawing off my husband's arm, the voice got louder and louder until I finally recognised it."

Kneeling on the towel next to Paco's body, with the bloody saw still in her hand, with her blouse splattered in blood and a crazy look on her face because she didn't manage to cut off the arm as it should be done, she recognised the voice she was hearing inside her head.

"It was Paco's voice," Irene murmured.

I nodded. I was expecting something like that, really. In fact, it would have surprised me to hear anything different at that stage. In a way, it was the only thing that made any sense. I suppose, in her position, I would have heard my mother's voice.

A woman approached from the esplanade, walking slowly. She pressed her bag tight against her side, as if she was worried that at any moment someone might snatch it. I waited until she was some distance from our bench before carrying on.

"And what did he say to you?" I asked her.

Irene blushed, cleared her throat, and then lowered her voice by two octaves. "He said, 'What the hell are you doing with that hacksaw in your hand, dear? Do me a favour and get the handsaw, can't you see that's for metal?' "

My laugh reverberated like a clap of thunder in the silence of the city. The woman with the bag, who was already ten metres ahead, hesitated and turned round to look at me for a second before walking on, this time more quickly. I kept on laughing, deeply relieved.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was all a joke. Now I got it, she hadn't killed her husband. She had made everything up, and I had taken the bait, hook, line, and sinker. It did not exactly match her usual sense of humour (which was rather inoffensive—the odd pun, the odd risqué joke) but, damn it, at least she wasn't a murderer.

I was still laughing when I turned to admit defeat, but what I saw froze the laugh on my lips.

Irene was serious, deadly serious.

"What are you laughing at?"

"It's all a joke, isn't it?" I replied, and I believe for the first time I thought that it wasn't, that she wasn't joking.

"What is?" said Irene, with an insecure smile.

"That you killed your husband. Everything."

This led to an uncomfortable silence, until she replied, "Listen, it's not at all easy for me to tell you this. If you are going to laugh . . ."

"No, no," I apologised. "Look. Forgive me. Go on."

"No, it's all the same, really."

"No, go on, please. Did you do it?"

"What?"

"The saw. Did you do it?"

"Yes, of course."

Irene did as she was told, and found out that, as usual, her husband was right. Thanks to the handsaw she made quicker progress, and before the clock struck twelve she had chopped up the corpse and put the entrails into a bucket. The question of the head remained, of course, but Paco told her not to worry about that.

"We'll bury it on the hills, it's not a big deal," said that inner voice once the blood in the bucket had been emptied into the toilet bowl and flushed several times. "What's important now is deciding what we're going to do with the bones."

"I don't know," replied Irene aloud, while she went back to the kitchen with the bucket she had cleaned under the spray of the shower. "Cats don't eat bones, and some of these bones are very large. Dogs, perhaps . . ."

"Forget the dogs," answered the voice. "I'll tell you what we'll do."

This was the most absurd story I'd ever heard, and I can assure you that I heard more than one absurd story when I was making a living in the 7 SINS. Had I really been about to ask that woman to marry me? Had the evening really started with me picking her up at the gates of the high school where—for God's sake—she gave night classes? How was it possible for us to get to this extreme in just a few hours?

I looked at Irene. She continued talking and stared out at the bay, her hands gesticulating in the air while she explained to me

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that she had ground the bones into small fragments that she then crushed in the Thermomix until they were reduced to a greyish powder. She talked about this in the same matter-of-fact way she would have explained to me how to make cod croquettes. Sometimes she hesitated for a few seconds, as if she was listening to the voice she recalled, Paco's voice, and then went on talking.

I think if I had left, she would have kept talking and talking all night on that bench, without caring that nobody was listening to her. Was it true what she told me? I suppose it's a fair question, especially after everything she had said up to this point in the story. Well, I didn't know it then, but sometime later (when I got over the shock of that night), I did a bit of research on the Internet, just a bit: put a name in a search engine and read the results related to that name.

Yes, it was true. Irene had been imprisoned in Soto del Real in 1996, charged with first-degree murder with aggravating factors: *She poisons husband and feeds him to cats,* said the caption below the photo in which Irene's small dark eyes had been touched up, giving them a yellowish shine: *The neighbours were alarmed by the unusual number of cats populating the area but didn't raise the alarm,* they wrote in the piece. *Once analysed by forensic specialists, the dust on the park's gravel paths was discovered to contain very high levels of calcium. That and other evidence, which is confidential information for the moment, appears to indicate that I.J.M. did not lie when she claimed to have pulverised the remains of her husband's bones.*

Yes, it was true, it was all true.

"The idea to grind the bones was Paco's," continued Irene, "and it was a great idea, really. It would never have occurred to me in a hundred years. Such a darling . . ."

Irene kept talking. I listened, in wonder.

From that time on, Paco—his voice, at least—went everywhere with her. It accompanied her on each walk in the park, when she scattered the fine grey powder her husband's bones had been reduced to. And he talked to her. He always talked to her.

He helped her a lot, all the time. He explained to her how to spread out the food for the cats in a way that would not attract too much attention. He helped her to cook the flesh in the pot, pointing out exactly when it would be ready. He corrected her every time she did something wrong, when she forgot and left a light on before going out.

"It was as if—as if he wasn't dead, as if he was unemployed and always clinging to my side, hanging around me."

Was there a touch of reproach in her voice when she said this? I think so.

When she went to the bathroom, Paco's voice told her just how

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

much toilet paper she should use so that it wasn't wasted; he reminded her to wash her hands and put the bar of soap back in the dish.

"A place for everything and everything in its place, dear. How many times do I have to remind you?" Paco's voice boomed constantly in her head.

When Irene turned up at the police station to report the disappearance of her husband, he whispered in her ear every single word she should tell the officer in charge of the case; in this respect she was fortunate enough to be able to rely on his help. But he also reminded her all the time about how she should make the meals, how to make the bed, where to begin vacuuming in order to make the best use of the cable trajectory. He shouted all the time when anything other than football was on the television. Weeks passed without Irene seeing *Médico de familia.*

"Frankly," she said after a pause, turning towards me, "I got a bit fed up with him."

I recall bursting into laughter.

"Don't laugh," she said, and I think she was biting the inside of her cheeks to stop herself from laughing. "Don't blinking laugh," she repeated, giving me a little thump on the arm.

I felt an urge to kiss her. I know it may sound absurd, but I *loved* that woman, and she had just opened up her heart to me. In a way, everything she had told me up till then (how she killed and carved up her husband) seemed somehow so distant and unreal. The real thing was her, just a few centimetres from me. Murderer or not (how do you suppose you can come to terms with that?), I loved her, and whoever said that love turns everybody into kamikazes was right. So I leaned towards her and kissed her.

I think I took her by surprise, because she resisted for a moment, but then her lips relaxed and our tongues played together for quite a while.

Had that woman killed her husband? It was impossible, and at the same time the most logical thing in the world. I would also have wanted to do it had I been in her position, and something deep down told me that was probably the reason why I loved her, because she had had the courage to do with Paco what I would not have been able to in a thousand hellish years with Raquel.

"I love you," whispered Irene when we drew apart.

It gave me the creeps. She wanted to kiss me again, but I pulled away gently.

"So, what happened next?"

"Next?"

"Yes, since you've begun to tell me everything, please finish before I come to my senses."

Irene smiled. She made herself comfortable again on the bench,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ironed out a couple of creases on her dress, and began talking again.

For a while (she said) everything was all right. Nobody suspected anything. The neighbours comforted her and tried to give her hope of finding Paco alive. Kidnapping was mentioned, and Irene knew that some gossips spread the rumour that he had eloped with another woman, but nobody got even remotely close to the truth. In the neighborhood, the feline population increased in spectacular fashion, but nobody put two and two together.

But that voice in her head didn't go away.

"It was horrible. He was always around, time and again. In the supermarket, he complained when I didn't buy the chops he liked. I stopped going to the greengrocer's because he just shouted: 'Not that apple, the one above! The one above that, look! Can't you see that one is bruised?' "

Irene began to regret having seasoned his meal with rat poison. Now Paco was with her twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Finally, a month after the cats had polished off every last scrap of meat, she went to a psychologist and told him as much as she could: that her husband had disappeared, she feared he was dead, and occasionally she seemed to hear his voice. Even that watered-down version of the truth was enough to put the psychologist on the right lines.

"Do you feel guilty about his disappearance, Irene?" he asked her, adjusting his glasses with the middle finger of his right hand.

"Of course not," she replied quickly.

"It would be the most normal thing in the world. When someone has a limb amputated, they continue to feel pain for a while after it is no longer there. It's what they call phantom pain. You've only been married for a short time, it's not surprising that . . . "

Irene paid for the consultancy, but never went back to see that psychologist.

"But I kept thinking about what he had told me, all that stuff about guilt and acknowledging our mistakes in order to make a new start. Paco said it was just baloney, but I think he was a bit scared. On the other hand, I had got to a point where I couldn't suffer him any longer. Paco had become totally unbearable. So much so that one day I plucked up some courage and went to the police station where I had reported the disappearance of my husband."

"And did you confess?" I asked, with my elbow leaning on the arm of the wooden bench.

Irene nodded.

"I confessed everything."

Sitting in the office of the chief inspector, a slim type with a sallow complexion and an embittered appearance, she confessed every-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thing: how she dissolved the rat poison in her husband's meal, how she found him dead after returning home. When she was going to tell him about the way she had chopped up her husband's body, the policeman asked her to wait there a moment and left the office. From her chair, with her bag placed on her lap, she heard him shouting for "the damned voice recorder." Five minutes later, he returned to the office with it in his hand. He closed the frosted-glass door and warned her that from then on, if she had no objections, everything she said would be recorded.

"It seemed fine to me, so I went on talking."

Staring at the red light on one side of the voice recorder, Irene explained to the astonished chief inspector how she had chopped up her husband's body, boiled the remains, and distributed the flesh in the park for the cats to eat, a little every day and always in places some distance apart so as not to raise suspicion.

"When I explained to him how I had ground the bones, I realised that total silence had fallen over the police station. I looked towards the door and saw that all the officers were listening on the other side of the glass," said Irene, throwing her head back, laughing softly.

"And did it work?" I asked her. "Did you stop hearing the voice?"

"Oh yes! At first he protested quite a lot, and of course he didn't stop shouting for a minute. But when I finished and the chief inspector asked me to record a statement to confirm that I had confessed of my own accord, without having been subjected to police brutality of any sort, and I agreed, the voice fell silent."

"Then?"

"I never heard it again. That psychologist was right," she concluded with a charming smile. "They tried me, found me guilty, and I served my sentence in Soto del Real. My lawyer insisted I shouldn't mention the voice because, according to him, it would seem that I was making it up to plead temporary insanity and thus would appear guiltier in the judge's eyes. They reduced my sentence because of work and good behaviour and, as I had finished my teaching degree in prison, they put me on a rehabilitation program. That's how I ended up giving night classes. And that's it, I suppose."

I stared at her without knowing what to say. Irene was looking at me too. After a while, she went on, "Do you still love me?"

Did I love her? I searched deep down for a response and got it almost straightaway: Yes, I loved her. I suppose it had all happened so quickly, so abruptly, that I didn't have time to reconsider my feelings towards her. Suddenly I remembered the reason why I had invited her to dinner that night. I put my hand in my pocket and took out the little box. I offered it to her, opening it slowly.

Irene opened her eyes wide; I would swear she was on the verge of tears.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"My God! Is it for me?"

I nodded, taking out the ring and placing it on her ring finger. My heart was beating in my chest like a little bird's wings. Irene raised her hand in front of her face to admire the stone's glow under a streetlight.

"It's lovely!" she exclaimed. Huge tears ran down her cheeks. "It's lovely."

We had a long hug next to Puerto Chico. The halyards struck the masts like the erratic ticking of a clock. A road-sweeper's van with its flashing light, very like that of an ambulance, brushed the whole of Castelar.

We went back with our arms around each other's waists, in silence. The tide had begun to go out and you could hardly hear the sound of the water from the pier. In the Jardines de Pereda there were just a couple of prostitutes, looking for a treble. For them, the night had only just started.

We got in my car and went to her house. Irene shone, pure and clean, like a religious icon. We made love. When we finished, I heard sobbing on her side of the bed. I kissed her tears and asked her why she was crying.

"They're tears of joy," she responded. And we made love again.

There's still one chapter left. One last chapter.

That same night, a few hours after we made love for the second time, I was awoken by a light whisper of sheets behind me. I thought Irene had changed her position, so, after seeing on the clock on the bedside table that it wasn't yet five in the morning, I got ready to go back to sleep. But I couldn't. I began to go over and over the maddening story that Irene had told me, recalling every one of her words, the taste of that kiss on the bench in front of Puerto Chico, the twinkle in her eyes when she saw the ring, the *joy,* and so on. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that Irene was the love of my life. In my head it seemed as if I could hear bells, wedding bells. We would have children. We would grow old together. I realised my life was really just beginning that night, and I felt like crying as Irene had done hours earlier: crying out of pure happiness.

The room was dark and silent. The only light was the luminous digits on the clock bathing the chair with my clothes in a faint crimson glow, the chest of drawers at the back, the window with the blinds down. I stayed very still in that calm scene, lying on my side, smiling in the darkness while the smell of our sex pervaded the air I was inhaling. I may have gone back to sleep.

After a while, however, I heard another noise and this time I was wide awake. It was a sharp sound, the scraping of metal on Irene's side of the bed. Metal scraping against metal in the darkness, slowly, very slowly. All my hair stood on end instantly, and I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

felt as if my testicles had turned into tiny ball bearings. Somehow, I managed to stay still.

I heard a whisper near my ear, the stifled voice of a woman.

"I don't want to do it," whimpered the voice. I shuddered. It was Irene.

The sound was extinguished, but the silence terrified me even more. If the sound had been produced by something being removed—something *metallic*—hidden between the mattress and the bedsprings, that silence meant it was already right out, in her hand. Suddenly, fleeting images of the pig slaughter filled my head. Knives. Enormous butcher's knives.

"He's sleeping. It's time," muttered a man's voice behind me in the darkness. I recalled the way Irene had imitated Paco's voice, and I felt my heart beat faster in my chest.

"I don't want to."

"Do it."

"No."

I heard that metallic screeching sound again. I thought about old swords being replaced in their scabbards.

"You're right," replied the man's voice. "Perhaps it's a little too soon . . ."

"It is."

"Too soon," insisted the voice.

The metallic sound was extinguished again, and only the darkness remained, the red chest of drawers, the clothes upon the chair, the silence. Whatever was there under the mattress had been put back. I stayed still. I heard the whisper of the sheets behind me, and I felt Irene's breath, her hot breath, next to my ear. And afterwards she slipped her arm round me from behind, her head leaning on the pillow beside me, and her legs tucked into the gap next to mine. Sleeping by my side. Sleeping peacefully by my side.

Now I couldn't get back to sleep. The clock on the bedside table had just gone seven-thirty. I got up and dressed without taking my eyes off the love of my life, who was still in bed. When she asked in a sleepy voice where I was going, I told her I was on my way out to buy something for breakfast. I quickly closed the door of the flat behind me. I flew down the stairs and went out into the cool street. I began running towards the car, parked a couple of streets away. But before reaching it, I slowed down. On the other side of the street, the smell of freshly baked bread was wafting out of a bakery.

I stopped for some five minutes. I don't know what went through my head during that time, but what's certain is that eventually I began walking, crossed the street, and went into the bakery.

I bought two croissants and, with them in a paper bag, returned to Irene's place, still hearing deep down that sweet tolling of bells.●

For Manuel de los Reyes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MOON MADNESS

by Tom Tolnay

It began at precisely 1:09 A.M. Edgar Snipe knew this because a harsh voice on the street below had yanked him out from under layers of dreams, back into this world, and the lighted slot of his digital clock stared at him like the rectangular eye of a Cyclopean robot.

"I'm gonna kick your ass all the way to the moon, Irma!"

With a precinct house halfway down the block, Edgar figured that, before long, the drunk would be prodded away into another neighborhood at the end of a nightstick. Cops working the gallows shift, after all, needed their sleep, too. But no. The loudmouth continued to rant directly outside his tenement: "You hear me, Irma? From Ninth Street all the way to the freakin' moon!"

At 1:22 Edgar heard the scuff of slippers on the wooden floor in the apartment above his. The window groaned open, and the booming voice of the matronly black woman who lived up there broke upon the moon-bleached streets. "Take that noise someplace else!" Then quieter: "We got kids sleeping up here."

The drunk roared: "Mind your own business, fatso!"

"If you don't shut your trap," the woman bellowed, "I'm calling the cops."

"Call the cops! Call the army! Call the President!"

The upstairs window slammed shut, and Edgar heard her feet, sounding heavier, thump across the floor. Silence took hold upstairs, making him think the mother of three might be dialing the police. He was glad. If that hollering kept up much longer, he might feel obliged to get out of bed and do something, and he was too tired to be arguing with a drunk at 1:26 A.M. He'd worked over-

Tom Tolnay is the author of two suspense novels (*Celluloid Gangs* and *The Big House*, from Walker & Company), two collections of short stories, and dozens of stories in magazines ranging from *The Saturday Evening Post* to *Twilight Zone* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. His fifth book, *The Forest Primeval*, is a novel of psychological suspense, scheduled for summer 2007 release from Silk Label Books.

©2007 by Tom Tolnay

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

time that night and hadn't gotten home until nearly eleven. In a few hours he'd have to crawl out of bed, slap a cheese sandwich together, fill his thermos with coffee, and catch the Second Avenue bus uptown.

A bony-armed, wispy-haired man of fifty-four, he had elevated the skill of avoiding involvement to a minor art form. Mostly his connection with others consisted of untangling the data that defined his customers' lives, adding and subtracting and multiplying and dividing until a picture of the circumstances of the small shop owners began to emerge—all of this accomplished behind the frosted-glass door of a one-desk office in a building left over from the Industrial Revolution. After work each evening he would ride the bus back downtown, triple-lock his apartment door, shove a TV dinner into the microwave, and, before retiring for the night, light up a cigarette and read a few chapters of a science-fantasy novel. Next morning the routine would start all over again.

In the guts of the alley between the stained brick tenements, a slinky, elongated gray cat picked up the lament of the man on the sidewalk, and the two of them wailed mournfully in unison. Far off, possibly above Fourteenth Street, Edgar heard the charged swoon of a siren, followed by another and another—a three-alarm blaze had broken out somewhere downtown. More distantly there was a muffled boom—a gas-pipe explosion, he speculated, or maybe a husband had shot his wife in the act of sharing their bed with his best friend. Edgar sneered knowingly.

He turned onto his left side, facing away from the window. But the drunk had launched into a string of profanities that Edgar's ears couldn't escape, each four-, five-, six-letter word shouted without a pause in between. All the while the moon kept advancing, slicing the room with sharp bands of whiteness between the blinds.

Beyond sleep, Edgar climbed gravely out of bed and, wearing loose pajamas that made him look like an urban scarecrow, moved to the window and lifted one plastic slat in the blinds: A man with a blast of silvery hair, wearing a ribbed undershirt and dark work pants, was now hollering not at the tenement but at the moon, stopping only to take a swallow from the bottle he was clutching by its neck.

"Aw, shut up," Edgar protested quietly.

He gazed at the cutout of icy light. Though he'd followed news accounts of the flights to the moon in the 'sixties and 'seventies, and had seen the fuzzy images of astronauts beamed back to Earth on television, he still found it difficult to accept wholeheartedly that human beings had set foot on its distant, reflective surface; that one of them had jabbed a pole bearing an American flag into its gray silt, kicking over stones that had lain undisturbed for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

millennia. To him space travel still seemed to have a closer connection to science fiction than to reality.

Governments, if not scientists, had largely lost interest in the study of lunar terrain in the decades after the last Apollo flight. But Edgar had read in the Sunday papers that this was changing. Not only the United States but several other nations were developing plans to launch lunar flights. According to the article, an unmanned Japanese flight would soon be hurling missile-like instruments onto the moon to penetrate deep inside its surface to study the composition of the moon's innermost interior.

The novel he'd been reading that evening seemed to echo these developments. A team of multinational scientists had launched a manned rocket to the moon and the astronauts proceeded to drill far below its gray surface. Presenting their discoveries to an international quorum of astrophysicists in Stockholm, Sweden, the team leader made an astonishing claim: "Following extensive analysis of samples taken, we've found that the moon's core is composed of living tissue, containing cells that resemble neurons."

That was where Edgar had put the book down—hours ago, though he had a pretty good idea of where the plot was going. The scientists would claim that through telepathy, or perhaps through its rays of reflected light, the moon was projecting thoughts into the minds of the inhabitants of Earth, affecting how human beings behaved.

Such fictional imaginings were too far removed from reality to interest Edgar in any very meaningful way; they simply helped pass the lengthy evening hours of an accountant who had lived alone with his numbers for many years. But tonight those hours had been stretched almost beyond endurance by the noisy intruder on the street.

The drunk wailed: "I'm gonna boot your mother's ass off the planet, too, Irma—just like a football." Appreciating his own simile, he repeated it again and again, finally breaking into a burst of grating laughter. Whenever the drunk paused in his shouting, Edgar knew it was only to take a swallow from his bottle.

Next-door, through the wall, Edgar heard something heavy drop onto the floor, and suddenly his next-door neighbors, a young couple to whom he'd nodded once or twice, began arguing, though he couldn't quite make out what they were saying. The couple had always seemed to get along well, but Edgar understood the strange things that being awakened abruptly in the middle of the night could do to people.

He considered opening his window and telling the drunk to get lost, but he knew that would only encourage him to continue barking at the moon. His bare feet chilled, he returned to his bed and wriggled his bony body onto the limp mattress. Immediately he drew the blanket over his head, but it didn't help.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hey, Mr. Moon—I'm sendin' you a coupla earthlings to bury in your craters!"

Now Edgar remembered the dream he'd been immersed in when the drunk had jolted him out of sleep: The moon had grown angry over the intrusion of astronauts probing beneath its surface, with the likelihood of more to come now that China, India, Japan, and Europe had announced plans for lunar explorations. And so, with its powerful icy rays, it had frozen all feelings of love in every human heart on Earth. The accountant smiled coldly at the thought that maybe the moon had frozen his own heart already, many years ago.

Finally, at 1:53 A.M., Edgar heard another voice outside, and it sounded authoritative. "It's about time," Edgar said gratefully, getting up and scuffling across to the window.

Raising two slats of the blind, he saw a tall, square-shouldered policeman, arms crossed, standing over the much shorter drunk. The bottle, lying in the gutter, glistened in the moonlight. "You've had a little too much to drink, old-timer, and the neighborhood's had a little too much of you. Why don't you and I take a walk."

"I'm stayin' right where I am," the old man declared. "Not one inch am I gonna move!"

"Where do you live?" said the cop in a tolerant yet insistent tone.

"Nowhere—as of tonight, I don't live nowhere."

"In that case you'd better come along with me to the station and sleep it off."

"You can't make me leave—this sidewalk's public property."

In the apartment above Edgar's, the mother yanked open the window and screamed, "Throw the bum in jail!"

From a window below his apartment came a chesty voice: "He's keeping the whole damn neighborhood awake, Officer. Get him outta here. I gotta work in the morning."

"Gonna chop all of you up into pieces like chunks o' cheese!" the drunk roared at the building. Enjoying his latest simile, he repeated it a couple of times. "Like chunks o' cheese!"

"Pipe down, Pop," the policeman said, his voice growing agitated.

Deep in the alley, the cat made a trio out of this duet of distress, releasing that nerve-shriveling *meowwwwww* again. A block or two away the huge tire of a delivery truck blew out, and an auto-theft alarm went off somewhere. On the ground floor in Edgar's tenement an infant began wailing, coughing, choking to catch its breath. On a nearby street, a dog barked hoarsely, triggering a howl from another backyard dog.

The turmoil caused Edgar to recall something he'd read about mental patients ascending to the heights of their madness under the gravitational pull and marble glare of a full moon.

As the voice of the drunk began to fade down the street, followed by the policeman's voice goading him along, Edgar heard the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

young couple moving around, bumping and thumping, in the next apartment. Aroused from their sleep by the unrest of the night, he figured, they'd begun to take it out on each other, and their voices quickly grew loud and bitter.

"You didn't seem to mind Greg putting his hands all over you."

"Look who's talking! Don't think for one second I didn't see you hanging on to Dahlia all night."

Suddenly they broke loose, screaming wildly at each other—one of them throwing something made of glass, maybe a lamp, against the wall with a great crash.

"You're nothing but a slut!" roared the young man.

"I hate your guts!"

Edgar Snipe gave up on sleep. Staring at the scratches of moonlight clawing their way across the tangled sheets on his bed, he began piecing together the events of the night, passages from the novel he'd been reading, details of that news item, and fragments of his dream—and in the wooziness of a thick fatigue began to wonder whether some sort of vengeful force might truly be at work in the moonlight.

At 2:16, lying in bed against the wall that separated their apartments, Edgar heard the slap of what sounded like a fist meeting a wad of flesh. The young woman began shrieking hysterically. Edgar stiffened.

"If you ever touch me again," she sobbed, "I'll cut off your fingers," her voice fading as she escaped into another room.

After a few moments of silence, Edgar heard the young man yell, "Put that down, Susan—have you gone nuts?"

"What's the matter, Jack? Not such a big *man* anymore?"

Good Lord! thought Edgar, sitting up, wondering if he should do something. Now he heard them struggling, apparently falling onto the floor with a clatter, as if they'd knocked over a night table on the way down. Edgar kneeled on his mattress and pressed his ear against the wall. The young woman sounded very much like that cat in the alley, letting out a piercing screech.

"Give it back—it's mine, give it back!"

"Who's afraid now?" he demanded. "Come on, tell me—who's afraid of the big bad knife now?"

Alarmed, Edgar jumped out of bed and dashed to the window, opened it wide, and leaned out: He could not see the policeman or the drunk anywhere on the street. And he heard someone running across the floor next-door. Without a notion of what he ought to do, he felt himself moving toward his front door, his pajamas striped by horizontal slices of moonlight.

The doors of the two apartments opened at the same moment: The young woman, dark-haired, wild-eyed, wearing a pink nightshirt that didn't quite reach her knees, sprang against Edgar,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

startling him as well as herself. In the dull light the young man, a head taller than both, suddenly loomed over them, his taut body covered only by a black T-shirt and white undershorts.

Though Edgar saw the descent of the steel blade all the way—as if it were approaching in slow motion—he was powerless to stop it from plunging into his shoulder. Backwards into his apartment he staggered, the pain seeming to come on slowly, and then making him dizzy. He collapsed, his limbs sprawling awkwardly across the floor. He could taste a salty thickness, hear the rasp of shrill voices, sense the suddenness of movement around him. But when he tried to see what was going on, he was too weak to raise his head.

With his mind lolling near the craters of unconsciousness, he focused on the only image that came to him, clinging to it as if it would help prevent him from falling off the edge of the Earth: A figure in a silvery, puffy, one-piece suit, with a transparent globe for a head, was jabbing the sharp point of an aluminum flagpole into a spongy gray surface.

Stripes of sheer whiteness continued to spread over the linoleum in his apartment, until they touched Edgar's nicotine-stained fingertips, and the sound of the ambulance grew louder.●

Blog Bytes (continued from p. 57)

Another entertaining group blog is Poe's Deadly Daughters (http://poesdeadlydaughters.blogspot.com/), property of Julia Buckley, Sandra Parshall, Elizabeth Zelvin, Sharon Wildwind, and Lonnie Cruise. Sandra's recent post on "book lust" really hit home with me. Lonnie often does interviews with other writers, and there's plenty of discussion of writing and personal things. Sharon might reprint one of her reminiscences of Vietnam, or Julia will talk about a favorite poem. Guest bloggers show up occasionally, too. Reed Farrel Coleman put in an appearance just the other day.

Murderati (http://www.murderati.typepad.com/) has the largest group of the three. Mondays belong to Pari Noskin Taichert, and on Tuesday either Louise Ure or Ken Bruen takes over. Wednesday brings Robert Gregory Browne or J. D. Rhoades, whereas Thursday belongs to Simon Wood. J. T. Ellison has Friday, and Alexandra Sokoloff gets Saturday. Sunday Mike McLean has the floor. Guest bloggers Naomi Hirahara and Toni McGee Causey give the others an occasional break. As you can see, there's bound to be lots of variety, and topics have included a review of the first season of *Freaks and Geeks,* a report on the *Romantic Times* conference, and a report on Malice Domestic, with photos.

Bill Crider's own blog, Bill Crider's Pop Culture Magazine, can be found at http://billcrider.blogspot.com.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

IDEAS IN MY HEAD

by Janice Law

You know that old saying, *Don't try to put ideas in my head*? I've had an interesting example of that, and I can tell you that once certain ideas get into your mind, they lodge there like grit. You can't get them out and you can't leave them alone; pretty soon, you can't think of anything else.

That's the way it was with Jack and me. Once Herbie had planted the suggestion, there was nothing we could do about it. And anyone who knew Herbie, that's Herbert A. Rothberger to those of you outside the business, probably wouldn't blame us at all.

Janice Law is a prolific short story writer and also an accomplished novelist, who created one of the earliest modern female detectives, Anna Peters. The Edgar-nominated author's most recent novel, *Voices* (Forge, 2003) was a finalist for the Connecticut Center for Book Fiction Award. The *Hartford Courant* praised the book's "depth and grace." *Booklist* called it "quietly compelling." ✝

Where was I? Alien ideas in the brain are seriously distracting and some days I have problems putting my thoughts in order. Which is a laugh, being that Jack and I are professional wordsmiths. Arsen and Dutton—you can ask around—everyone knows us. We're maybe not your top-of-the-line scriptwriters and script doctors—no auteur stuff, no Oscars on our shelves—but we've had a couple of pilots made, and we've written for most of the top cop shows and hospital dramas, and we've both made major money in the soaps. Several film-scripts, too—one of them made—I want you to see we're pros.

Nonetheless, even pros get the blues in the form of rejection slips from baby-faced execs with their feet on their desks and your script bound for the shredder. Jack and I'd hit a run of bad luck, which is why we wound up one wet day—a bad L.A. omen right there—in the offices of Distracting Productions, the bailiwick of Herbert A. Rothberger, a.k.a. Herbie, pitching an action yarn.

Slipstream was a solid piece of work with a nice role for the child phenom of the moment, a moppet with blue eyes and blond

©2007 by Janice Law

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hair named Ashley Button. I kid you not. She was known around the studios as Cute-As, as in *cute as a button,* and she was a serious talent with a good memory and precocious eyes.

Our plot was watertight. That's Jack's doing. His dialogue is for the bin, but his plot construction is a thing of beauty, and I think Herbie got to him before he got to me. I think so.

Anyway, we're sitting in Herbie's big office beside a NordicTrack with zero miles on its odometer and a spidery Bowflex that looks carnivorous, and a decorative secretary who's probably not as dumb as she looks. I usually do the talking, so I launch into our spiel: "A big-time hijacking goes bad when the cargo turns out to be nuclear fuel rods. The robbers go on the lam with the representatives of a rogue state behind them and both the CIA and the FBI bringing up the rear."

"Think *The X-Files* without the aliens," says Jack. "Advanced paranoia."

Maybe wrong to mention a Fox show to Herbie, who had, I seem to recall, a death feud with the network.

"So what the hell is it?" he says, not waiting to find out. "Is this a heist picture?"

"Yeah, a heist picture, but not just a heist picture, because, see, along the way, they're spotted by this little girl, who gets her father involved, plus we've got the subplot with the agents, kind of a father-son or brother-brother thing going . . ."

This goes nowhere with Herbie. To Herbie, *Moby Dick* is a fishing story, pure and simple.

"Heist pictures are dead. With Tom Cruise, maybe. Cast of unknowns and the little blond brat—no way."

"We don't have to cast unknowns," I says.

Herbie snorts. He has a particularly repulsive nostril-clearing snort, like a pig with a fly up its nose, that brings his own porcine nature front and center.

"You guys bring me a Tom Cruise, a Cate Blanchett, a Will Smith picture, I'll be the first to let you know."

See the kind of guy we're talking about here? Gratuitous, right? As if he wasn't resident in the B-picture universe himself.

"However," I says, "this is a heist picture with a difference. And the script's like a clockwork toy." I start to describe the novelties and beauties, the many ingenuities that Jack has concocted and which I have adorned with razor-sharp dialogue.

"Heists are dead," says Herbie. "Plus, there's no romance. How're you going to pull in the date audience with no romance?"

"All right, all right," says Jack, who's quick off the mark plotwise. I can see the wheels turning in his mind, clear as one of those old clocks with glass front and back so you can see the gears moving. "There's the kid, we start from the kid, all right, and we add—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG.
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He doesn't even get the sentence out before Herbie says, "No kids. Kids are for Oxygen, Lifetime, housewives in the afternoon. Forget the kid."

"Forget the kid," Jack repeats.

"I wouldn't touch the kid for an Oscar nomination—her mother's poison and her dad's a lawyer."

"We make her an adult," says Jack.

Herbie purses his lips. "A hot babe?"

"Combustible," Jack says.

"Maybe with a thing for one of the robbers?" I suggest.

"Yeah," says Herbie. "You try that and get back to me." His hand's already hovering over his intercom button.

Jack and I get out onto the street. We've forgotten umbrellas and it's pouring. "Remind me never to buy a gun," Jack says. "I wouldn't trust myself."

We go back and rework *Slipstream.* Cute-As has transmogrified into an eighteen-year-old bombshell who's definitely trouble. She's friends with one of the heist team, a fact her FBI agent father only belatedly registers. "We got parental angst, we got family, we got high drama," I tell Herbie when we see him next.

"And we've sharpened up the suspense," Jack says. "The guys on the heist are really pawns of terrorists. They don't realize, and when they do . . . "

His Film Eminence frowns. "People don't want to be scared," says Herbie. "They want to be scared, but not of something that could really happen to them."

"You want Godzilla?" says Jack. "You want Creature of the Black Lagoon?"

"Listen, I'm trying to help you guys." Herbie's all offended. "What's her name, the broad with the father complex—"

"Heather."

"Heather's a dumb name, Heather's been overdone."

"We can change the name," I says.

"So change it. She has possibilities. Fuel rods—who the hell understands fuel rods? See what I mean? That's why I say, heist pictures are dead."

"Slice of life? A smaller drama?" Jack asks. "Father-daughter conflict—strait-laced agent versus rebel daughter? Heist in the background?"

"Some small pictures have done well lately—good return on investment," I says.

Herbie agrees to look at the rewrite.

By this time, we're beginning to sweat. Jack's been borrowing from me and I've been pawning stuff acquired in my palmy days. We buckle down, anyway. Like I say, we're pros all the way. We lose most of the heist except the actual theft and focus on the conflicting loyalties of the father and daughter.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We've got a different angle on the perpetrators, too," I tell Herbie at the next meet. "No more professionals. Small-timers, desperate men. There might even be a role for a good kid actor—one of them has a sick child. See, it's desperate men on both sides."

Herbie listens to all this. At least this time we get through the whole pitch. "You know, you guys got no sense of the times," he says when we're done. "Sympathetic criminals—tricky at best. Okay if they're rich, get what I mean? You redo *Topkapi,* professional thieves, glamour guys—women love outlaws—you're okay. Poor and desperate—no way. Throw the book at them. Where've you been?"

Back to professionals. Back to square one, but we don't mention that. "That can be done," I says. I'm thinking that we have most of what's needed back in version one.

But that's not enough for Herbie. He basically doesn't like the heist at all.

"Suppose it goes wrong even earlier," says Jack. "Suppose our juvenile female winds up a hostage? Ropes and bondage," he adds—Herbie's tastes being well known.

"I'll look at it," he says, and then as an afterthought, he adds, "You get it done fast, drop it off at my house. I'm out of the office for a couple of days."

This sounds like interest, so, back at the computers, Jack and I pull three straight all-nighters. Now the daughter is hanging out with a trucker who's unwittingly been assigned the nuclear cargo. Missy's with him in the truck when they are hijacked at a rest stop. He gets shot—we debate over his fate—and she becomes expendable, but maybe irresistible, supercargo. Lots of opportunity for cleavage and noir closeups; heavy breathing in semidarkness—Herbie stuff all the way.

Jack and I exchange high-fives and figure we're home free. We messenger the script, and sure enough we get called back into his office pronto, but when we start talking about the fine points of the new story, he's suddenly not sold. That's Herbie—New England weather in Southern California—the worst of two worlds.

"It's all right," he says, "it's a picture. But I'm thinking chick kidnapping's been done, know what I mean?"

We do, having hit every cliché in the book as per his own request, because Herbie demands the sure thing. We'd had a script for Cute-As—a genuine talent; we'd had topical suspense—ripped from the headlines, no less, but that was too much novelty for Distracting Productions. So we went the other way and here we sit while he has second thoughts.

"Now," he says, like he's just come up with inspiration, "you got a guy kidnapped, man against the elements, that kind of stuff, I'm maybe hearing you."

Man against the elephants, I think, elephants being a herd of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Herbies with loud ties and black shirts and elegant little patent-leather loafers with no socks. I'm getting up from the table before I cross some verbal Rubicon, but Jack's into the challenge—he later told me he was desperate; he'd maxed all his credit cards and he was ready to run with whatever Herbie threw his way.

"Yeah," he says, "no heist, no nukes, we heist a guy. A young guy—get the girlie audience."

Herbie shakes his head. "Stale. You need a guy in his prime. Harrison Ford of a few years ago."

"More than a few," I mutter, but Herbie doesn't notice.

"All right, all right," Jack goes, "guy in his thirties, maybe."

"Forties," says Herbie, who's closer to fifty, I'm thinking.

That limits the pool of actors—and raises the price, but I can see this is personal for Herbie. He's got a stake in this, something beyond the usual profit margin for Distracting Productions.

"You want a kidnapping story?" I says. "With a man the victim?"

"Kidnapped but not the victim," Herbie says. "Not the victim. Where you guys been? Audience surveys pass you by? We're sick of all these girlie men."

"Our perpetrators bite off more than they can chew?" This plot-line's been around since O. Henry's "The Ransom of Red Chief." Not that Herbie reads.

"Yeah. You got it."

"Diamond merchant, maybe?"

"Too ethnic," says Herbie.

"But he's got portable goods on him. There's your motive."

"I got to plot this for you?" asks Herbie. "They hold him for ransom—"

"Requires an organization," says Jack, thinking out loud.

I realize we could use our heist prep scenes if we modified them a little.

"Smart has organization. Dumb's different. These guys grab him and go. They're operating seat-of-the-pants," says Herbie.

"This is a farce?"

I get a look of thunder. Herbie lowers the boom. Reaches for the death ray.

"Look," he says, "this is real. This is reality, today's mean streets. Danger on every corner."

"Yeah, but the plot's got to be plausible. You got a big executive, ransom-worthy, he's got the bodyguard, he's got the chauffeur."

"Look," says Herbie, "not all of us run scared. I drive myself unless I gotta find parking."

Jack gave me a sideways look. I think that was it; right then, I felt the idea. You know, you can feel an idea coming. Like with a story, you don't have an idea, and then you still don't have an idea but you have this feeling that one is in the vicinity, that you just have to watch and wait and you'll find yourself sitting down at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

computer and typing in *Scene I.* That was the sort of feeling I had when Jack looked over at me.

"Gated property, though," Jack says. "Like yours."

We've been to *Chez Herbie,* where we were checked and double-checked and scrutinized by little glowing lights—and recorded, too, probably. All this to keep down the covetousness of the general public, which might cast a longing eye on the velvet lawn, the topiaries, the roses, the marble-fronted palace, the soigné assistant, and the shrewish, if very desirable-looking, blond wife.

Herbie gives a snort of exasperation. "You get him at work."

"Most executive offices are better protected than your private homes," Jack says.

"There's always a weak point," says Herbie.

"Garage?"

"You got it. The monitoring in this one isn't worth shit. They got a fortune worth of trash compactors and air filters but they're cutting corners all the time on the monitors."

"Problem is their car, though," I say. "And even a rental—"

"Maybe they walk," says Herbie. "Maybe they drive both cars. Christ, I thought you were the writers and I was the producer. You get this done, I'm going to take a writing credit. You get him in the garage, see, and you wrestle him into the back of the car."

"Nobody wrestles Harrison Ford into the back of a car," I observe. "Not in his heyday."

"Have to whack him good," says Jack.

"No damage," says Herbie, "not so soon. Drug him, maybe. Save the blood for later."

We talk about this awhile. Then Jack and I get our marching orders. Back to the script one more time. We're really punchy, but we rack our brains and study garages until we finally come up with a story that's ingenious, real quality, but at the same time, no good. We know all too well what Herbie wants now: man against the elephants, i.e., middle-aged, overweight CEO outwits the lowlife and emerges triumphant.

Still, we need money, we need money now. We put aside a clever, if brutal, plot involving a quick killing and a trash compactor and ditch a script loaded with smart lines to bring our CEO home in glory. We call the office and once again Herbie's secretary tells us to drop it off at his house.

"I don't like this," says Jack. "Something here smells funny. Totally funny. It's like he wants to keep this out of the office. What's he got going here that's not strictly flicks?"

"Beats me," I says. As it turns out, our professional imaginations didn't run as fast as Herbie's. "He doesn't like it, we pitch our other solution."

Jack looks at me. "He gets one more chance, this is it."

And I don't say anything, though I know what he's talking about

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and though *silence bespeaks assent*. Call it a *folie à deux*. Or *trois*—I got to include Herbie somehow.

We get the call late. Herbie's pleased. The script's crap, but Herbie's pleased. As writers, we don't feel great, but we need the cash.

Jack puts on his lucky Toledo Mud Hens hat, and we hustle off to Distracting Productions as lights come on in the City of the Angels. Upstairs, Herbie is alone, his decorative secretary departed. I don't see any sign of our script, which I take as a bad sign, but he says, "So you got it done. Not bad at all."

We're expecting our contract, but Herbie starts talking about his financing difficulties, certain problems with his stake in a special-effects action flick that ran over budget. "I love this, don't get me wrong; I love this," Herbie says.

"You could have told us a month ago," says Jack.

"A month ago, I didn't love the script," says Herbie. "You understand this business. Things change."

We let him have it then, but Herbie didn't budge. The script was "great, super; ideal for my purposes" and "maybe in the spring finances will allow," etc., etc.

Jack and I go slamming out of the office. "We've been had," says Jack, "but I don't know what his game is."

I'm no wiser, and there we are swearing up a storm and kicking along the sidewalk when Jack says, "I forgot my hat."

Personally, I never want to see Herbie again, but that hat's a classic and Jack can't write without it. To save time, we cut back in the side door of the garage and we're tearing up the ramp when we see Herbie, suitcase in hand, heading for his black Mercedes. He's whistling as if he hasn't a care in the world.

"Hey," says Jack. "I gotta get my hat out of your office."

"No time," says Herbie. "I'm in a major hurry."

"It's my Mud Hens hat," Jack says. "I gotta get it."

"Tough." Herbie opens his trunk with the remote, throws in his luggage, and reaches for the door.

I've never seen Jack move quicker. Next thing I know, he has Herbie's arms behind his back. Herbie's struggling and shouting, and I clock him one and then again. He deserves it. Jack's trying to trip him up, but Herbie breaks away and I stick out my leg. Crash, Herbie bangs into the side of the car and he kind of staggers and makes a lunge again for the door. I don't know yet if I hit him or Jack did, but in all the confusion Herbie falls, bam, onto the cement and doesn't get up.

He's out cold. So much for man against the elephants. The garage is suddenly very quiet; I can't even hear the traffic on the Strip. That's an effect often used in thrillers of the psychological persuasion, but in real life, it surprises me.

Jack and I look at each other. "What are we going to do?" he says.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He comes to, we don't work in this town again."

That's a consideration. But I take a closer look at Herbie and suddenly I feel sick and hopeful at the same time. "I don't think he's coming to."

Jack disputes this, claiming esoteric medical knowledge.

I check again and shake my head. "He's not coming to."

We look at each other for a moment, then *bang*. That's what I mean by ideas in your head. We've plotted this out. And when somehow the situation jumps from the page to the VIP section of Herbie's garage, we know what to do. Without thinking whether this is a good idea or a bad idea, we pick up his keys, grab Herbie the Inert and drag him to the back, where, yes, indeed, there's the trash-compactor chute. Jack punches in the numbers; he always does his research, right down to trash-compactor access. With the over-the-top plots we cook up, you gotta have the details right.

Just the same, I'm in a sweat until the thing starts to grumble and the door slides open. One, two, three, heave! Herbie with his patent-leather loafers and his mean disposition disappears with a soft thud.

"What about his car?" I ask as Jack wipes the keypad and the handle.

"Leave it. We gotta get that hat, though."

Up the back stairs, down the hall. I'm drenched with sweat and I can hardly breathe. Doing stuff like this is seriously different from even the most vivid imagining. At the door, I pull my shirt cuff over my hand and when Jack turns the key, we open the door, adrenaline bathing every cell, alert for alarms and sirens. I think I'm going to pass out before Jack grabs his hat and we get ourselves downstairs and onto the street. It feels like we've hit a wormhole and accessed some parallel universe, because everything looks the same but feels different.

Nothing is quite real to us; we're light and new. At the same time, any thoughts about the garage and Herbie and the sound of the compactor bring certain details up to more reality than we can handle, number one being the script we followed. This is burned soonest and wiped off our computer disks, and we make an effort to erase the plotline from our neurons as well.

All this ultracaution blows up when we remember that our earlier copies made their way to *Chez Herbie*. Crisis time. Whatever fiscal or domestic machinations Herbie had in hand, he'd made sure his wife had access to our work. What for?

We're clueless, but anyone who looks at the script's evolution from heist to accidental kidnapping to executive kidnapping would sure have questions now. Especially the bereaved Mrs. Herbie.

By the end of the week, Jack and I are little more than sweat-soaked nerves. I get so that I'm hallucinating LAPD cruisers and I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about leave my skin every time the phone rings. The longer—inexplicably longer—we wait for what seems inevitable, the worse it gets, and I think we'd both have been committable but for a lucky spell of hurry-up work on a soap pilot.

By the time we come up for air, the Rothberger case is on the back pages. A few months later, it's stony cold. Herbert A. Rothberger disappeared from his office, leaving half a million dollars skimmed from Distracting Productions in the trunk of his Mercedes. No one has heard from him since.

A year later, Jack and I have almost convinced ourselves none of this had anything to do with us, when we get a call from Leonie Rothberger. Major panic attack, but we can hardly snub the new—and able—head of Distracting Productions.

Next afternoon: same office, different secretary; no more Bowflex and NordicTrack. Mrs. R. ran to a nice line of Asian porcelain and modern furniture. She had a big mane of blond hair and a vaguely predatory air. A fat pile of familiar-looking scripts sat on her desk.

"I've been going through the files," she says. "Herbert had a number of your properties."

"We'd been discussing some projects with him at the time—of his—" I'm at a loss for words, so I add, "So tragic for you," though she hardly looks consumed with grief.

"*Slipstream* is a nice piece of work. I'd like to option it."

Well, well! It's nice to be appreciated even by the dangerous Leonie Rothberger. We have a good meeting about casting and production and she offers very fair terms. At the end, she puts her hand on the rest of the scripts. "What do we do with these?"

"We were under a bad influence at the time," says Jack. "I think the shredder's the best place for them."

Leonie Rothberger gave a faint smile. She's not a woman to reveal her emotions, but—scriptwriter's eye—I pick up on that. "The wisest thing for your reputations." A little pause; a warning? "Kidnappings and ransoms are so overdone."

"And maybe for you too," I says.

"He'd have taken the money and run, if he hadn't been—intercepted somehow." She looks at us very steadily. I guess right then that she has a good working theory of whatever Herbie's game was and maybe also who did the intercepting.

I don't trust myself to answer and neither does Jack. After a beat, Leonie Rothberger switches on an industrial-strength shredder and starts feeding in the scripts. "I hate to do this to gentlemen with imagination," she says as our writing turns into packing filler. "But it's for your own good."

"Ashes to ashes and pulp to pulp," says Jack.

Mrs. Rothberger gives a feline smile. "Amen to that," she says.●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Mark Evan Walker

The Theft of the Ostracized Ostrich

by Edward D. Hoch

It had been more than a year since Sandra Paris, known in some circles as the "White Queen," had last encountered Nick Velvet. She thought of him often, sometimes as a friend and occasionally as an adversary. Once, during a particularly passionate dream, she'd even imagined him as a lover.

She was thinking of him as her plane landed at the Palm Springs International Airport. This was a job like any other, she decided, and there was no need to call on Nick for assistance. Besides, even a six-month-old pair of ostriches could bring well over three thousand dollars, and a full-grown pair much more. They were hardly valueless. Ostrich farming had become a profitable business in many parts of the country, especially in the desert regions of California.

The first thing Sandra did after claiming her luggage was to pick up the rental car she'd reserved. Her destination was north of the city, near Desert Hot Springs, an ostrich farm called Bainbridge

©2007 by Edward D. Hoch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Acres that was home to half a hundred of the birds. Sandra had dined on ostrich meat at a New York restaurant and found it similar to beef, but it was supposedly much healthier. She'd been hired to steal one of the birds, but apparently not for the meat. Renny Owlish had been very specific when he hired her by phone. She'd see one ostrich away from the others, all by itself. "An ostracized ostrich!" he'd said with a chuckle. "That's the one I want you to steal." He'd made a plane reservation for her and even booked a room at a nearby motel.

Inexhaustible is the word that comes to mind when one thinks of Ed Hoch. It isn't only that he's written more than 940 published stories. He also generously serves on awards committees (most recently for the CWC's Arthur Ellis Awards), provides a necrology for the MWA annual, and often writes introductions to other writers' books. ¶

She'd been driving about thirty minutes when she rounded a curve and saw the ostrich farm below her in a little valley. There was no mistaking the great flightless birds with their long legs, mostly black feathers, and tall curving necks. The slightly smaller females had grayish-brown feathers with a bit of white. And yes, one ostrich was noticeably off by itself. Sandra pulled off the road and watched it for a time. Once it started trotting over to join the main group but they immediately scattered.

That was the bird Owlish wanted, but seeing the size of it she knew she'd need a truck of some sort. The birds had a large area to roam in, and with the warm weather they'd probably be left out at night. Her best bet was early morning, before the Bainbridge workers were out in the field tending to the birds. She was the White Queen, after all, and *Impossible things before breakfast* was her motto.

She spent the day searching out the right sort of vehicle and finally decided on a horse trailer. At a distance it was difficult to estimate the ostrich's height, especially with its head bobbing up and down, but she guessed at between six and nine feet, pretty much full-grown. If she could entice it onto the trailer's ramp, no lifting would be required. Otherwise she was faced with the task of tranquilizing the big bird and lifting its two-hundred-plus pounds into a truck.

She spent her second day observing the early-morning routine at Bainbridge Acres through binoculars from the nearby hill. Nothing much happened till after daylight, when a sturdy woman in jeans and boots came out to fill the trough where the big birds drank. She seemed to be checking their water supply and scattering food pellets, though Sandra knew that ostriches were a grazing bird that could live off natural vegetation and insects. She estimated the flock of about fifty birds would need around twenty acres for food but they seemed to have all of that. She'd read somewhere that the toothless

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ostriches ate almost anything, including pebbles and stones that remained in their stomachs and helped grind the swallowed food.

That night she went to bed early and was up well before dawn. The motel night manager, Sid Rawson, saw her backing out with the horse trailer and came over to question her, his squinty eyes on the lookout for trouble. He relaxed a bit when he recognized her as a guest, but still asked, "You got a horse in there?"

"Not yet. I'm on my way to pick one up. That's why I paid in advance. Hold the room, though. I might be back for another night."

"Drive careful now."

Sandra had noticed an access road that ran along the outside of the Bainbridge fence through some brush toward a distant cabin probably used by hunters. She was wearing a black sweater and jeans, and slipped a black stocking cap over her blond hair. She doused her headlights and turned down the dirt road, guided mainly by moonlight though the first hint of daybreak had appeared on the eastern horizon. Already she saw some of the ostriches approaching, running toward the fence. But in near darkness it was difficult to pick out the one she wanted.

Stopping the car, she opened the door of the horse trailer, positioned the ramp, and clipped through the fence with wire cutters, hoping there was no alarm system. Now that her eyes were accustomed to the gathering light she was able to pick out the shunned bird, standing off to one side on its slender legs. She circled around and charged the ostrich, waving her arms to drive it toward the hole in the fence. Then, when it was close enough to be forced through to the horse trailer, she attempted to put an arm lock around its neck.

That was when things turned ugly.

"The damned ostrich kicked me, Nick! It almost broke my leg!"

Nick Velvet stared down at Sandra and shook his head. He'd flown across the country in answer to her urgent phone message to find her nursing a badly bruised thigh in a seedy motel room in the California desert. "I came to your rescue once after you were bitten by a cobra in Marrakesh, but I hardly thought you'd need me after being kicked by an ostrich in California."

"It's not funny!" she groaned, shifting her weight a bit and pulling up her jeans. "And that's all you get to see."

"Too bad. I was admiring the view. You're sure it's not broken?"

"I had it X-rayed at the hospital, made up a story about falling down the stairs. It's just a bad bruise, but I sprained my ankle when I fell. They told me to rest, put ice on it, and keep it elevated to hold down the swelling."

"How were you able to get out of there?"

"Luckily it was my left leg, so I could drive, but of course I didn't get the ostrich, and by now they've discovered the cut fence and probably have a guard on duty. That's why I need your help, Nick."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I don't steal ostriches. They're too valuable."

"Not this one," she argued. "Their biggest value is for breeding, but this one is shunned by the others for some reason. Breeding is doubtful. Its only value would be for meat."

"And feathers and leather. Their eyes, which are larger than their brains, are sold to researchers, and their feet are ground into powder and sold in the Far East as an aphrodisiac. Even their large eggs are valued in some African religions."

"Come on, Nick! How'd you learn all that?"

He smiled. "On the Internet. I travel with a laptop computer now, very twenty-first century. While I was waiting to board the plane I went online."

She gave a sigh. "Will you help me?"

"Who hired you and how much is he paying?"

She hesitated and then said, "I can't tell you who, but he's paying me fifty thousand."

Nick shook his head. "I happen to know that you don't do anything these days for under a hundred grand."

"Is that on the Internet too?"

"No, but the word gets around."

She made an effort to sit up and put some weight on her left leg, but she grimaced in pain. "All right," she said. "I'm getting a hundred grand and I'll split it fifty-fifty with you. Satisfied?"

"What makes this particular ostrich worth that much money?"

"I'm like you, Nick. I don't ask and they don't tell."

"Who's *they?*"

"Do you have to know?"

"Sure. What if something happens to you and I'm stuck with the bird on my hands? Gloria wouldn't welcome it back home."

"He's a man named Renny Owlish. A businessman of some sort. We've never met, but I'm to phone him as soon as I have the bird and set up a meeting. He already paid me a one-third retainer. Now you know as much as I do. Satisfied?"

"Do you still have the horse van?"

"Of course. I wasn't about to return it with the job undone."

Nick thought it over. "It'll be tougher now that they're on guard. For that kind of money why don't you simply drive up to the front door and offer to buy the ostrich? If he's no good as a breeder, they'd probably sell him for a few thousand at most."

"I should have tried that in the beginning," she admitted. "Now that they know about the robbery attempt, they know it's valuable to someone."

"They can't know you were after just one ostrich. They probably think ordinary rustlers were responsible."

She raised an eyebrow. "Ostrich rustlers?"

"This is the Wild West, isn't it? Suppose I drive out to see them in my rental car and get the lay of the land. What are their names?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's Bainbridge Acres, a husband and wife with a few farmhands to take care of the birds. I don't know their first names."

"I'll find out. You rest up. If this doesn't work I'll need your help."

Bainbridge Acres was located near the desert, but with vegetation and a flowing stream sufficient to supply the flock of half a hundred ostriches that raced around flapping their short, underdeveloped wings. The house itself was an adobe ranch sheltered from the sun by a few cottonwood trees near the edge of the stream. Nick parked his rental car out front and went up to the door.

The woman who answered his ring was short and graying. Nick quickly explained that he was from the Animal Protection Establishment.

"The what?" she asked.

"APE. I'm sure you've heard of us. We travel around inspecting flocks of farm animals. I was driving by and I detected a problem with one of your ostriches."

She eyed him through the screen door, unwilling to admit this stranger to her house. But she relented a bit and said, "That would be Oscar. We don't know what's the matter with him lately. He's acting so strange that we gave him a name, Oscar Ostrich. My husband says the gals won't let him near them. We may have to end up sending him to the slaughterhouse."

"That would be a shame," Nick told her. "Perhaps I could examine him."

"I'd have to ask my husband about that. Wait here a moment." She disappeared from the doorway and Nick glanced around, taking in the white wicker porch furniture and a stack of *American Ostrich* magazines.

He was flipping through one of these when a stout man in his fifties appeared in the doorway behind the screen. "Beth says you want to examine Oscar," he said without preliminaries. "You a vet?"

"No, I'm with APE, the—"

"She told me. Never heard of 'em."

Nick retreated a bit. "I don't want to give him a medical exam, just get a closer look at him, learn whatever you can tell me about his ailment."

The screen door opened and the man extended his hand. "I'm Walt Bainbridge."

"Nicholas," Nick muttered.

"Come along and I'll show him to you."

Bainbridge led the way off the porch and toward the barn. "Have you and the missus been in the ostrich-breeding business long?"

"Five, six years. The market for ostrich steaks and byproducts really took off around the mid 'nineties. We were late catching up."

They paused at a fence near the barn where water and feed were available for the birds. "When did this odd behavior start?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nick asked. A plane flew low overhead, drowning out his question, and he had to repeat it.

"That happens all the time," Bainbridge grumbled. "When did it start? Oh, maybe about ten days ago. He was fine until then. He's still fine, for that matter. It's the rest of the flock that are acting strange. Of course, ostriches have a reputation of being a stupid bird, but this is going too far."

"They don't really bury their heads in the sand, do they?"

"'Course not! The head's often down there nibbling sand or pebbles, or trying to hide from its enemies. But the head is never buried in the sand. They'd suffocate if it was!"

The ostrich in question had wandered over to them as Bainbridge coaxed it with a handful of seeds. Nick sniffed a bit, detecting a slight odor. "Do they always smell like that?"

"Like what? Nose isn't as good as it used to be. Too many allergies."

Nick stared into the massive eyes of the ostracized bird. "I haven't had much experience with ostriches. How do you handle something this large?"

"Very carefully. If they kick you, they could break your leg. Had some dogs out there barking at the birds one night last week, and someone cut through the fence two nights ago but the birds scared him off."

"Is that so?"

"Somebody'd have to be loony to try rustling ostriches. But next week I'm having some security cameras put in, just in case."

Nick agreed. "You can't be too careful. But what about handling them? You have to get your arm around their neck, don't you?"

"Not just that," Bainbridge explained. "You have to use a sock, usually one with the toes cut off. I wear it on my arm and when I grab the neck with my right hand I slip the sock off my left arm and over their head so they can't see. That's the best way to handle them."

"Good thing to know." He watched the behavior of the birds for another few minutes and then said, "That one wouldn't be good for mating. You should get rid of him."

"The wife and I talked about it. We might come to that."

"I could make you an offer right now if you're interested."

"Why would you want him if he's no good?"

"I know of an ostrich study under way at the University of Arizona. Your bird would make a perfect specimen for research."

The stout man considered his suggestion. "How much?" he asked.

"I think I could go as high as five thousand."

He considered it, then said, "I'd have to ask the missus." He turned and went back to the house.

Nick used the time to study the layout of the farm more carefully, in case he had to return after dark. In a few minutes he saw Walt Bainbridge returning. "What did she think?"

Bainbridge shook his head. "Not for any price. He's Oscar

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ostrich to her now, and she's not selling him for any research."

"Of course. I understand."

He drove back to the motel to give Sandra the bad news.

She listened in silence to his report, then tried to stand. "Those pain pills helped. It's coming along. I can go with you, drive the truck."

"Not tonight you can't," he decided. "Give it another day and we'll see how you are. I'll take a room here."

"You're welcome to sleep here."

"Now what would Gloria think about that? I'll get a room. The place is practically empty."

"It's after six. The night manager is probably on duty. His name is Sid."

"I'll find him."

Sid Rawson had just come on duty when Nick found him at the registration desk and took a room two doors down from Sandra. "I'll show it to you," Rawson told him. He was a slender man with long tapering fingers that seemed always in motion. "Got any bags?"

"Just this overnight one. I can manage it."

"You a friend of Miss Paris?"

"Business acquaintance." He was surprised that Sandra had registered under her own name.

"You like to play cards?"

"Occasionally."

"Later tonight there's a friendly game of poker in room Twenty-nine if you're interested."

"What time?"

"Around ten."

"I might drop in," Nick said. It would take his mind off Sandra Paris alone in her room down the hall.

He went to a fast-food place across the street and picked up something for them both to eat. "How are we going to steal the bird?" she wanted to know.

"We start by cutting the toes off a pair of my socks."

He hung around for a while after they ate, then went down the hall to room 29. The place was already smoky when Sid Rawson opened the door. There were three other men in the room and the night clerk was pleased to see Nick. "Good! You got a fourth, boys! I can get back to the desk."

A bald man named Josh Fielding seemed to be in charge. He unwrapped a new deck of cards and announced the rules. "We play Texas Holdem here. Are you in, Mr. Nicholas?"

"Sure," Nick said and bought twenty dollars' worth of chips from the banker, a red-haired man in his thirties. His name was Henry Wilson and he was a salesman of bathroom fixtures.

"Twenty won't get you far with this crowd," he warned Nick. "The ante alone is five."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A bit rich for my blood," he replied. "I'll go for forty and that's my limit."

The fourth man at the table, Charlie Rainbow, was a local rancher, part Native American, with a leathery face and deep blue eyes. They drew for the deal and he won, giving the cards a quick, rapid shuffle and cut. He dealt two hole cards to each player and the game was under way.

Nick lost another ten dollars before he folded, figuring he'd try one more hand before quitting the game. Fielding and Rainbow, who knew each other, were talking about the latter's German shepherds, which he actually used for herding sheep. Wilson was a stranger, much like Nick, but he managed to win the hand. On the second hand Nick had two kings as his hole cards, and he ignored his self-imposed limit to bet sixty dollars. One of the flops gave him a third king, but he ended up losing to Fielding's full house.

"That's it for me," he told them, rising from the table.

"If you're in town, try again tomorrow," Rainbow told him. "We try to get a game going most every night."

Nick returned to Sandra's room and was surprised to find her on her feet. "Where've you been?" she asked.

"Poker game down the hall. I lost."

"Nick! Keep your mind on business."

"More to the point, what are you doing up?"

"I dozed for a bit and I'm feeling better now. I think we should go tonight."

"Sandra—"

"In the early morning, before dawn. Before breakfast."

"Impossible things before breakfast."

"Exactly! I need you, Nick. I can drive the car, but I need you to get the ostrich into the horse van."

"He'll probably still be asleep."

She shook her head. "He was awake the other morning. Awake enough to give me a good solid kick."

He could see there was no talking her out of it. "All right," he agreed. "We'll go. I hope I'm more successful than I was at cards."

When they left the motel at four A.M., clouds had moved in to all but obscure the moon. Sandra was walking with a decided limp, but it didn't seem to affect her driving. "Bainbridge told me he's installing security cameras next week," Nick told her.

"Locking the barn after the horse—"

"Ostrich."

"—ostrich is stolen."

"At least we hope it'll be stolen," Nick agreed. "Here's the turn."

He'd debated whether to cut the fence at the same spot Sandra had chosen, but when they reached it there was enough pre-dawn light for Nick to see that the fence hadn't really been repaired,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

just patched with chicken wire.

"The same spot?" Sandra asked.

"The same spot. It'll be easy."

He'd barely removed the chicken wire when he saw some of the ostriches moving toward them. He slipped the toeless sock over his left arm and climbed through the opening. The birds seemed more curious than hostile and he moved quickly through them, searching for Oscar. The dark-feathered males seemed identical in this light and he decided to rely on his nose. He'd detected a definite Oscar odor on his previous visit.

And suddenly the ostracized ostrich was there in front of him, stretching its neck until it towered over him. The others had scattered, and Nick was alone with his prize. He took a deep breath and wrapped his right arm around its neck, careful to avoid a kick from its legs. Then he pulled the sock from his left arm and slid it over the bird's head. Oscar made a hissing sound, apparently a show of anger.

Sandra was waiting outside the fence with the ramp down on the horse van. "Be careful he doesn't kick you," she warned.

"Don't worry. I think I've got him under control."

"I remember that smell. What is it?"

"I have a feeling that's what makes him so valuable."

Oscar went into the horse van, his vision still obscured by the sock, and Sandra quickly closed it. "We make a great team," she said as she slipped behind the wheel and gunned the engine.

They were almost back to the highway when the first bullet shattered the side window behind Nick's head. "Someone's shooting at us!" Nick yelled. "Off to our right. Keep your head down!"

"Is it Bainbridge?"

"I don't know. Keep driving." He heard two more shots, but they missed the car. He only hoped they'd missed the ostrich as well.

"I can see headlights. He's following us!"

"Do you have a gun?"

She shook her head. "Couldn't get it through airport security. Didn't think I'd need one anyway."

The pursuing vehicle had cut across the field, trying to head them off. There was enough light now to make out a black SUV with tinted windshield, closing fast. "If he fires again he can't miss us," Nick told her. "Any ideas?"

"We stop and hand over the ostrich."

"And he'll kill us anyway."

"I guess you're right."

The SUV pulled up alongside them and a familiar figure got out. It was Charlie Rainbow, the rancher who'd been at the poker game, and he was holding an old-fashioned six-shooter aimed right at them. "Hey," Nick said in a friendly voice, "don't you ever sleep?"

"Not when I hear cars on my property. That's when I get out my pistol."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"This is your property?"

Rainbow nodded. "Right up to Bainbridge's fence. And you're trespassing, Mr.—Nicholas, was it?"

Sandra remained silent and let Nick handle it. "Sorry about the trespassing. My girl and I were just looking for a little privacy."

"Yeah? This isn't no lover's lane, Nicholas. Better go back to your motel room." He glanced at the horse trailer and waved the pistol at it. "What's in there?"

"My horse," Sandra said, breaking her silence. "Want to see him?"

"No, just get off my land."

"What about my broken window?" Nick asked.

"What is it, a rental? Just tell them it was vandalism. Their insurance will cover it."

"All right. Can I have a chance to win back my money tonight?"

Rainbow grinned. "Sure. We'll be there. Just stay off my land. I'd hate to shoot you by accident."

On the way back to the motel, Nick asked, "What if he was a horse fancier and wanted to look at your nag?"

"It was still pretty dark. He couldn't have seen him very well."

"Well enough to tell a horse from an ostrich, I'll bet."

"Nick, we have to take chances in this business, you know that."

"Are you always this lucky?"

She snorted. "I once served prison time for stealing a roulette wheel, as you well know."

"Okay, what do you do now? Phone Renny Owlish?"

"Exactly. We have a bird in the hand."

"Or at least in the van."

Sandra parked the van at the rear of the motel lot and detached it from her car. Nick brought out some water and snacks for the big bird, who didn't seem to mind his captivity all that much. Later he joined Sandra in her room and returned the trailer key to her. She called Owlish on her cell phone with the good news. "I have the product, Mr. Owlish. I'm ready to deliver it for the balance of the money."

Nick could hear the raspy response. "Where are you? At the motel?"

"Of course. Are you coming here?"

"It may not be safe. I'll call you back in a few hours, when I'm in the vicinity."

"Fine." She gave him her cell-phone number. "I'll be hearing from you."

"What now?" Nick asked.

"We've got the bird. All we have to do is turn it over to Owlish and collect our money."

"But why is he so valuable? Have you thought about that?"

"I'm just a thief, Nick. You're the one who sometimes plays detective."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It has to be drugs or diamonds."

"What do you mean?"

"Ostriches will eat anything, and since they have no teeth, small stones often remain in their stomachs to grind foodstuffs. An adult ostrich can carry a couple of pounds of pebbles in its stomach for this purpose."

"You've been surfing the Internet again."

"That's what it's for."

"So if it's drugs or diamonds, how did they get into the ostriches' lair in the first place? Do you think they just fell from the sky?"

"Exactly! Planes fly over Bainbridge Acres all the time. These were dropped in some sort of small containers to be picked up on the ground. Only the pilot missed the target area and the stuff landed among the ostriches."

Sandra wasn't convinced. "Even if our ostrich swallowed some of it, why would that keep the others away from him?"

"Oscar has a definite odor about him. Walt Bainbridge has allergies and couldn't smell it, but I certainly could and so could you. The containers for the drugs or diamonds or whatever were strongly scented so they could be located after being dropped from the plane. The scent was repulsive to the other ostriches and they steered clear of Oscar."

"Nick, can you imagine grown men sniffing around the ground for these things?"

"No, but I can imagine dogs."

She'd walked to the window to peer out at the car, and suddenly she cried out, "Nick! There's someone at the horse trailer!"

He was at the window in a flash, staring out at a red-haired man wearing a heavy leather coat. "Do you know him?"

"I never saw him before."

"I did. I played cards with him last night. His name is Henry Wilson. Come on!"

They reached the horse trailer as Wilson was struggling to pick the lock on the back door and the ostrich was giving out his familiar hissing sound. But he wasn't the only intruder. Nick saw Charlie Rainbow's SUV pulling into the parking lot and heading for them. "Get away from that trailer," Rainbow told them, brandishing the six-shooter he'd used earlier.

Wilson turned, expressing annoyance at the interruption. "Put that gun away, you fool!" he told Rainbow. "It's broad daylight! Do you want the police on our necks?"

"I want that bird," Rainbow said, "and I mean to have him."

"Wait a minute," Nick urged. "Before we all get arrested, let's go to my room and talk this over."

Sandra started to protest but he gave her a light jab in the ribs to urge her agreement. The four of them trooped up to Nick's room with Rainbow still keeping a hand on his gun. Nick sat them down

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and began talking. "I think you'll all agree that what we have here is a very valuable bird. I believe a flight by a private plane from Mexico purposely dropped several small containers holding a valuable substance, something you couldn't risk being found by Customs if you brought it across by car. They were meant to land on your property, Rainbow, but they fell into your neighbor's ostrich farm by mistake. We know ostriches will eat virtually anything, even small stones, and this one the Bainbridges named Oscar ate your valuable cargo. The pellets were strongly scented so they could be located by your dogs after they hit the ground. You mentioned at the poker game that you had German shepherds, which are often considered better than bloodhounds at picking up a scent. But the dogs merely led you to the ostrich farm, where Bainbridge heard them barking last week. After studying them and noting the ostracized one, you were sure it was the tracking scent that was keeping the others away. You contacted Renny Owlish and Owlish hired Sandra to steal the ostrich."

"What's Wilson's part in all this?" Sandra asked.

Nick smiled. "Owlish booked your hotel room so he knew where you'd be staying. He arrived here earlier and took a room under his real name, just to keep an eye on things."

"You mean Henry Wilson and Renny Owlish are the same person?"

"That's right," Nick told her, keeping an eye on Wilson.

"You knew that because of the bird in Owlish's name," she said.

"No, I knew it because Renny Owlish is an anagram for Henry Wilson."

"Oh."

"Let's cut the talk," Rainbow said. "The chips are mine and I intend to recover them from that bird's stomach."

"Diamond chips?" Sandra asked. "Is that what this is all about?"

Henry Wilson sighed. "Computer chips, the most powerful yet developed in Japan, stolen and smuggled into Mexico on their way to the highest bidder in Silicon Valley. Worth far more than diamond chips these days. They're packed into small metal capsules, twelve to a capsule. Six capsules were dropped. That ostrich has seventy-two computer chips in its stomach."

Sandra took over then. "The deal was one hundred grand to steal that ostrich, and I did it, with Nick's help. I want the balance of my money. Then you can have the bird."

"You've got a third of it. That's all you're getting," Wilson said. "You may have the ostrich but we've got you."

"Hand over the key to the horse trailer," Rainbow ordered. The six-shooter was back in his hand. "I can't miss at this range."

"You get the key when I get my money," Sandra told them.

Wilson slapped her across the face and Nick grabbed him around the neck, yanking him backward. But Rainbow moved in with his gun and pointed it inches from her head. "One move and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she dies," he shouted. "Give us the key!"

"You'd better do it," Nick told her. "They mean business."

"Nick—"

"Do it."

She slipped the key from the pocket of her jeans and handed it over. "Shall we tie them up?" Rainbow asked.

"No need," Wilson decided. "She's got a bum leg and he's past his prime. They can't hurt us." He took a packet of hundred-dollar bills from his pocket and tossed it on the bed. "Here's another ten thousand. Consider yourselves paid in full."

They left Nick and Sandra and headed for the horse trailer in the far corner of the lot. Rainbow brought his car around and hooked it up to the trailer. They didn't want to risk anyone seeing the ostrich in the busy motel lot, so they drove several miles out of town before they found a deserted side road where they could unlock the rear door and view their prize.

It was only then that they discovered the trailer was empty.

"How'd you do that, Nick?" Sandra Paris asked as they headed north with the ostrich in a horse trailer.

"When I went down to feed Oscar just after we got back to the motel, I saw the night manager, Sid Rawson, going off duty. I gave him a thousand dollars to rent a duplicate trailer. I knew one or both of those guys would show up. That's why I poked you to help get them up to the room and away from the trailer, so Sid could make the switch. I bought a new padlock for him to put on the duplicate trailer, and gave you the key to that lock, keeping the original key in my pocket. I promised him another thousand when we met him just now and reclaimed the bird."

"What now?"

Nick shrugged. "You should be able to find a veterinarian who can remove those capsules from Oscar's stomach without doing fatal harm. Then you drive to Silicon Valley and shop them around to the highest bidder. Maybe you can even get Oscar back to Bainbridge Acres."

"Come with me, Nick," she urged. "We'll have a fine old time together."

"I can't do it," he told her, a bit sadly. "I helped you this far as a favor, because you called on me. But my job is done now. You can pay me for expenses, but that's all. Drop me at the San Jose airport and I'll be on my way home."

"Gloria's waiting."

"Yes, that too. I hope she'll always be waiting."

When she dropped him at the airport she said, "I guess this is goodbye, then."

"If you ever get kicked by another ostrich, give me a call. You've got my number." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BLUES IN THE KABUL NIGHT

by Clark Howard

The old four-engine Constellation cargo plane dropped down out of the darkening Afghanistan sky shortly after flying over the border from Pakistan, and received landing instructions from the tower at Kotubkhel Airport outside Kabul. Morgan Tenny, hunched in a jump seat behind Benny Cone, the pilot, looked down on the squalid outskirts of the Afghan city as the runway lights came into sight.

"You sure I'm not going to have any problem at the airport?" Tenny asked.

"Trust me," said Benny Cone. "I been sneaking people in and out of this country for three years and haven't lost a client yet."

"What's your secret?" Tenny asked.

"Hershey bars," Cone replied.

"Hershey bars?"

"Yeah, with almonds. Afghanis are nuts about almonds. Excuse the pun."

The old plane's landing gear bumped hard against the blacktop runway, rose, bumped again, harder, then settled roughly into a jerky, lurching landing and decreased speed as it rolled toward the cargo terminal. When it came to a stop, Morgan Tenny followed Benny Cone through a narrow aisle between large, cable-secured wooden crates, to a high, wide cargo door which Cone unbolted and slid open on ball-bearing runners. Four forklift off-loaders were already driving toward the plane. Opening a hatch next to the cargo door, Cone unfolded an aluminum ladder that reached to the ground. Swinging a carry-on over one shoulder, he climbed down.

"Hand me your duffel," he said.

A professional writer for more than 30 years, and a contributor to this magazine for almost as long, five-time *EQMM* Readers Award-winner Clark Howard is most often associated with the crime genre. He has, however, written more than 200 short stories in other genres. And it isn't only fiction that he excels at. His true-crime books have brought him equal acclaim. This time out he writes of soldiers. It's a world he knows well. †

©2007 by Clark Howard

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tenny lowered an ancient sea bag on which could barely be distinguished four stenciled letters: USMC.

"Ain't seen one of these in a long time," Cone said. The closure of the bag folded in quarters over a steel hasp through which a combination padlock was fastened. "Heavy, too," the pilot observed. "Whatcha carrying?"

"The usual things," Morgan Tenny said as he climbed down. "Guns, ammunition, laundered currency."

"Everything a tourist in Kabul needs," Cone said with a smile. He nodded toward the terminal. "Follow me. Keep your mouth shut and do what I say. You ever been to Kabul before?"

"No."

"Well, it's a real shit hole. It's like no place you've ever seen, man."

"I've seen a lot of places, Benny," said Morgan Tenny. "Zaire, Saigon, Nairobi, Angola—"

"Yeah, well, you ain't seen noplace like Kabul. It is a *real* shit hole. The whole place."

"I thought the U.N. was cleaning it up after the Taliban got bounced?"

"The U.N. is a joke, brother. Wait and see."

The two men entered the Customs and Immigration section of the shabby cargo terminal and found a heavyset, droopy-eyed Afghan man browsing through a U.K. edition of *Playboy.*

"Moazzah, my friend!" Cone greeted him jovially. "How are you?"

"Passports and visas," the man named Moazzah said, without looking up from the magazine.

"Moazzah, look what I have for your lovely wife," Cone announced, pulling a carton of two dozen Hershey bars, with almonds, from his carry-on.

Moazzah looked up and took the carton. "Very nice, thank you." He held out a hand. "Passports and visas."

"And," Cone further declared, "look what I have for your beautiful mistress!" He produced half a dozen packages of black pantyhose, held together by a thick rubber band.

"Such generosity I do not deserve," the Afghan official said. His free hand was still out. "Passports and visas."

"Moazzah," Cone pleaded pitifully, "you know I am a stateless person without papers. All I want is a permit to unload. I won't even be leaving the terminal."

"And your friend?" Moazzah inquired.

"A tourist, that's all. He missed his commercial flight from Karachi and out of the goodness of my heart I gave him a ride. But his passport is still at the Arabian Air desk back there. Be kind, Moazzah. He just wants to spend a few nights with the China girls at the Escalades."

"I see," said Moazzah. The Escalades was the most notorious of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kabul's brothels. It was currently being run by a White Russian woman who called herself Madam Kiev, who had the best body in the brothel but never sold it, and had two former sumo wrestlers at her side at all times to keep the peace in her busy establishment. Moazzah knew the place well. He eyed Morgan Tenny for a long, solemn moment. "Pray tell, what do you have in your duffel?" he asked.

Morgan shrugged. "The usual things: guns, ammunition, laundered currency."

For a split second Moazzah frowned, then laughed out loud and pointed a finger at Morgan. "Your friend," he said to Benny Cone, "is a very funny fellow."

"Yeah, a million laughs," Cone agreed, smiling nervously. He handed Moazzah a British fifty-pound note.

"Take him to the taxi queue," the Afghan official said. "But *you* remain in the terminal."

"Blessings on your house," Cone said as Moazzah put the candy and pantyhose into a deep desk drawer and locked it.

The pilot led Morgan outside where several rattle-trap taxis waited. "You'll find Donahue at the Dingo Club," he told Morgan. "He's partners in the joint with an Aussie ex-pat. Tell him I said cheers."

Morgan nodded. "Thanks for the help."

"Thank *you,*" said Benny, "for the stack of hundreds. Good luck."

I'll need it, Morgan thought, getting into a taxi.

The Dingo Club was on Chicken Street, one of Kabul's main pot-holed thoroughfares. Night had fallen now and multicolored neon lit up the sidewalks and the milling people entering and exiting shops selling handicrafts, carpets, pastries, hijacked Western food, pirated DVDs, and, farther along, bars, clubs, brothels, massage parlors, fast-food joints, tattoo kiosks, and the like, all of it reminding Morgan of the last week before Saigon fell. Slim and slung Asian girls wearing purple and orange makeup plied their trade to passing mercenaries, war-zone hangers-on in combat fatigues, along with contract laborers in denims, U.N. workers in dress shirts with rolled-up sleeves and neckties stuck in trouser pockets, and a few young U.S. Marines on liberty. All of them were armed: automatic rifles held casually, shoulder holsters holding Walther PPKs, revolvers tucked under bullet-filled cartridge belts. It was a totally dangerous street, but no one seemed to be bothered by it.

Morgan stepped inside the entrance to the Dingo Club. During the taxi ride to town, he had unlocked and opened his sea bag, and now had a Sig P230 automatic pistol in his waistband under his coat, an extra magazine of 60-grain bullets for it in his coat pocket, and a smaller automatic, a Kahr K9, in his belt at the small of his back. Standing just inside the club door, the big sea

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bag slung over one shoulder, he scoped out the noisy, raucous, smoky scene before him. Like a cautious falcon in unknown woods, his eyes flicked along the packed bar, the booths lining the walls, the tables in between, looking for familiar, especially unfriendly, faces among the patrons, bartenders, waiters, and pimps for the China girls who were working the room. Even after he spotted Donahue, the man he was looking for, his light-blue eyes kept moving, shifting, searching, until he had satisfied himself that he had no enemies there—at least none on the surface. Only then did he make his way to a back table where Donahue sat with three other men.

"Hello, Donny," he said when he got to the table. Donahue looked up.

"Well, well, well," he said. "If it ain't the calm half of the infamous Tenny twins. I wondered when you'd get here."

"You can stop wondering now," Morgan said.

The man at the table stood up. Michaleen Donahue was a great bull of an Irishman, sixty-six years old, thick-necked, massive-chested, muscular-armed, wearing a skin-tight camo shirt over which was strapped a Roto shoulder holster and magazine rig holding a Glock 17 automatic on one side and a double magazine pack on the other. He grabbed Morgan in a grand bear hug. "How are you, boyo?"

"Good, Donny. You?"

"Never better, lad. Come on, I've an office where we can talk. 'Scuse me, mates," he said to the other men at the table, and led Morgan into a nearby hallway to an office where he closed the door behind them. It was a sparsely furnished little room, with a metal utility desk, metal chairs, and several metal ammo boxes on the floor being used for files.

"Sit, boyo, sit," Donahue said, dropping his bulk into a swivel chair behind the desk and retrieving a bottle of Gilbey's and a pair of metal canteen cups from a bottom drawer. He poured two doubles.

"Cheers," they said in unison, and took their first swallows.

The swivel chair creaked as if in pain as Donahue leaned back. "I'm afraid you've made a trip for nothing, lad. What you're here for is a lost cause."

"That doesn't sound like the Donny I've known all these years," Morgan said.

The Irishman shrugged. "As a man gets older, he gets wiser. Wiser about everything: women, drinking, killing. He tends to realize there are some things he simply can't do anymore."

"Aren't you the one who always said life was doing what couldn't be done, and the rest was just waiting around?"

"Like I said, I'm older now."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, maybe I'm wasting my time with you, then," Morgan said. "Maybe I should look for someone with more grit."

Anger flashed briefly in the big Irishman's eyes, but he quickly suppressed it and leaned forward, folding his thick fingers on the desktop. "Look, Morgan, I know there's a fine edge to you right now, with your twin brother Virgil being held in the Pul-e-Charki prison. But he's been charged with the torture and killing of three Afghan citizens while attempting to get information from them as to the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden—all so he could collect the twenty-five million bucks bounty on the son of a bitch. Virgil's going to be tried before an Afghan judge named Mehmet Allawi, who is as anti-Western as they come. He has stated openly that Western influence since the fall of the Taliban is ruining his holy land, and he's the leader of a party that wants all non-Muslims thrown out of the country. Your brother is the first Westerner to be charged with a capital crime since the U.S. invasion in 2001. Allawi intends to use him to make a statement against the U.S., the U.N., and all other foreigners who are here. Virgil is going to be found guilty and hanged. And that, my boy, is that."

"I intend to break him out," Morgan said simply.

"Break him out?" Donahue grimaced in disbelief. "Out of Pul-e-Charki? You're dreaming, lad. It's not possible. There's no way to spring a man from there."

"I don't plan to just spring a man. I plan to liberate the whole damned prison, Donny."

Donahue grunted. "That would take a small army."

"I want to raise a small army. A strike force of trained mercenaries."

"You're crazy. It would cost a million dollars."

"I've got a million dollars," Morgan said. Reaching down, he patted the sea bag on the floor next to him. "Right here."

"You serious?"

"Dead serious." Morgan leaned forward, elbows on knees. "I know about that prison. I know men who've been in it. I've heard stories. It's a filthy cesspool. Whips, chains, rats, vermin, slop for food—it's a nightmare. They've even got torture chambers—"

"Your brother Virgil is in there for torturing people," Donahue reminded him.

"The three men Virgil tortured—"

"Two men," Donahue corrected. "One woman."

That gave Morgan pause for thought. But only momentarily. "Makes no difference," he said. "They were all al-Qaida. No telling how many innocent people they'd killed. Whatever the case, I want to blast open Pul-e-Charki prison." He locked eyes with Donahue. "You with me or not?"

Donahue took a long sip of gin, then pursed his lips for a moment. Finally he said, "Tell you what. You and me'll go out and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have us a good look at Pul-e-Charki in the morning. Then you can tell me how you'd plan to go about doing it. After I hear your plan, I'll decide. Good enough?"

"Good enough," Morgan agreed.

They toasted again and finished their gin. Then Donahue asked, "Got a place to bunk yet?"

"No."

"Down the street to the right. The Mustafa Hotel. Use my name. Tell the desk clerk to give you an upstairs room in the back, away from the street noise. I'll come by for you about ten in the morning."

With his sea bag again slung, Morgan left the Dingo Club and turned right down the busy street, his senses alert to everything around him. He knew before she got there that a young woman was hurrying up beside him.

"Excuse me. May I speak with you for a moment, please?"

"Not tonight, honey," Morgan said, thinking she was street girl. "I'm dead tired, just in from a long flight."

"I know," she said. "I followed you from the airport."

Morgan stopped, his right hand instinctively going to the automatic in his belt. "You *followed* me from the airport?"

"Yes. In my car. I wanted to talk to you."

Looking more closely, Morgan now saw that she was definitely not a street girl. She was, he guessed, Afghan; *modern* Afghan: smallish, attractive, wearing a stylish pantsuit, carrying a large purse over one shoulder. He decided to play dumb.

"Why on earth would you follow *me?*" he asked with feigned innocence.

"My name is Liban Adnan," she said. "I'm a broadcast journalist. For NKR—New Kabul Radio. I'm doing a series on mercenary soldiers in the city. I'd like to interview you."

"You've made a mistake, miss," Morgan said. "I'm not a mercenary soldier. I'm a pharmaceuticals salesman."

"Oh?" Her full, dark eyebrows went up. "When you were leaving the Dingo Club, I saw you shake hands with Michaleen Donahue, a notorious mercenary soldier. Were you selling him aspirin, perhaps?"

"I went into that club to ask directions to the Mustafa Hotel. I didn't even know the man I was talking to."

"I see." She pulled a five-by-seven black-and-white glossy photograph from her purse. "I suppose you're going to tell me you don't know this man either."

In the neon light above a lap-dance club, Morgan looked at the picture. It was his twin brother, Virgil, in handcuffs and belly chain, being held between two Afghani policemen.

Taking Liban Adnan roughly by the arm, Morgan drew her into

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a nearby passageway between buildings, out of the busy sidewalk traffic. Once there, he kept her arm in a grip tight enough for her to know that she could not break away.

"Exactly what do you want?" he asked coldly, evenly.

"I told you. An interview. I want to explain to the citizens of Kabul why scores of heavily armed men prowl their streets at night. I want to try to make the public understand who they are and why they are here."

"If I *was* a mercenary, do you think I'd be stupid enough to let you interview me about my reason for being here?"

"It could be an anonymous interview," she said, squirming in his grip. "We could even use a vibraphone mic to disguise your voice—"

"Look, miss," Morgan said firmly, "you've got the wrong person, understand? I don't know the man back at the club, and I don't know the man in that photograph!"

"But he looks just like you. Is it you, or—or are you his *brother?*" she exclaimed, as if that had just dawned on her.

"Listen to me, lady," Morgan tightened his grip on her arm, "mind your own business or you might be very sorry."

Liban squirmed even more. "Please, you're hurting me—"

Morgan let go of her arm. "Stay away from me," he warned.

Leaving her in the passageway, Morgan stepped back onto the sidewalk and continued toward the Mustafa Hotel.

Donahue was in the hotel lobby at ten the next morning when Morgan came down. He led Morgan outside to a battered Jeep with no top. Donny was again wearing the double Roto holster, and now was carrying an AR-15 automatic rifle as well. Morgan carried his same two handguns, but also had with him a Mossberg 500 shotgun equipped with a Knoxx folding stock, which allowed him to carry and fire it as a long-barrel pistol. He again had his sea bag slung behind one shoulder, but it was noticeably lighter now.

"Unpacked everything but the money, I see," Donahue observed.

"You guessed it," Morgan replied.

"Carrying it around like that, ain't you afraid somebody might take it away from you?"

"Somebody might die trying." Morgan jacked a 12-gauge Pit Bull shell into the Mossberg's chamber and held it between his knees next to the sea bag when he got into the Jeep. As Donahue slid behind the wheel, he observed that Morgan was wearing a flak vest under his jacket.

As they pulled away from the hotel, Morgan noticed a green Volkswagen parked nearby. Liban Adnan was in the driver's seat. *Son of a bitch!* he thought angrily. But he said nothing to Donahue. He did not want to alarm him.

The two men drove out of town. As they moved past numerous

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

destroyed buildings and out onto a vast, flat scrub plain, Morgan watched in the outside rearview mirror on the passenger side and saw that the green Volkswagen was following at a respectable enough distance behind not to be obvious. Glancing at Donahue, he concluded that the big Irishman had not noticed it. Cursing silently in his mind, Morgan decided to go with the flow of the moment; there was nothing he could do about it, not just then. But later . . .

About ten miles outside Kabul they pulled onto a gravel road that faced Pul-e-Charki Prison. From outside, the facility appeared antiquated, its walls crumbling in places, its turrets looking unsteady at best. The Russians had built the place when they occupied Afghanistan, and its upkeep had been inadequate even then. After the Afghan government took it over, maintenance deteriorated even more: the cells, plumbing, toilets, food, and prisoner treatment—all went to hell. Everything except security: That had improved.

Donahue parked where they could get a view of the main gate and outer walls. "Picture yourself looking down at it from above," he said. "There are four blocks of cells around an inside courtyard. Block One, called 'Block-e-Awal,' is there," he pointed toward one front corner. "That's for high-status prisoners, foreigners, mercenaries mostly. They've got Jack Idema in there. He ran Saber Seven, a freelance outfit that captured and tortured Afghan nationals, just like your brother did, trying to get a lead on Osama bin Laden. Jack's doing ten years; he was smart enough not to kill anyone. Virgil's in there too, along with some journalists and photographers who wrote about and photographed some things the new government didn't approve of.

"Block Two is directly across the center courtyard, over there," Donahue pointed to the opposite corner. "It's strictly for political prisoners, nobody really worth mentioning, mostly just ex-Taliban and protesters against the U.S.

"Block Three is back there, behind Block Two. It's full of common criminals: thieves, child molesters, drunkards, dishonest merchants, people who disrespect the Koran and Muslim law."

Donahue stopped talking and looked out over the wasteland toward a hazy, indistinct horizon. Morgan waited several moments, then: "You said four blocks."

"Yes, well." Donahue cleared his throat. "Block Four is where the executions take place. Some hangings. Beheadings. Occasional lesser punishments: cutting off the hands of a thief, blinding a man who spied on another man's wife that he coveted, stoning to death of women adulterers—"

"Rough justice," Morgan commented.

"If you can call it justice at all." Donahue's voice, Morgan

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thought, sounded unusually soft and sympathetic. Especially for a man who had for more than forty years killed for a living.

Glancing off in the distance, Morgan saw the green Volkswagen parked where its driver could observe them. He was going to have to decide what to do about the woman. He could not let her upset his plans to save his brother.

"So what do you think, lad?" Donahue asked, interrupting Morgan's thoughts.

"You have any guard contacts inside? That can be bought?"

"Maybe." The Irishman shrugged.

"Can you get me a dozen men—*good* men—on the outside?"

"Depends. You want specialists?"

Morgan nodded. "Four explosives men, two rocket experts, six tough ground troops."

"Possibly. Weapons?"

"AR-15s for the ground troops, plus any handguns they want for backup. Thirty-seven-millimeter launchers for the rocket men. K-2 plastics, coils, and timer detonators for the explosives."

"Ammo?"

"The works. Armor-piercing, incendiary, tracers. The best available. And plenty of it."

Donahue rubbed the stubble of beard on his chin. "Vehicles?"

"One armored halftrack with dual tactical mounted .50-calibers. And a Devil's Breath with dual tanks."

"Jesus, Morgan! A flamethrower?"

"Yes. And two armored specialists to handle the whole rig."

Donahue sighed. "Anything else?"

"Two armor-plated Humvees for the rest of us, to flank the halftrack when we charge the main gate." Morgan took a deep breath. "That's it."

"You're sure now?" Donahue asked, a little sarcastically. "Sure you don't want a couple of fighter jets to strafe the place ahead of time?"

"Can you get it all or not?" Morgan asked flatly

"I'll let you know. Come see me tonight at the Dingo."

As Donahue drove them back to Kabul, Morgan watched the green Volkswagen follow them in the passenger rearview mirror.

His lean jaw clenched.

Half an hour after Morgan returned to his room, there was a soft knock at his door. Holding the Sig 230 close to his right leg, he stood to the left of the door and said, "Yes?"

"It is I," a female voice said. "Liban Adnan."

Snatching the door open, Morgan jerked her into the room and locked the door behind them.

"You've got a hell of a lot of nerve coming here after following

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me all morning!" he said angrily. "Didn't I warn you to stay away from me?"

"I am not afraid of you!" she snapped.

"That's obvious. What the hell do you want now?"

"Perhaps," she said, her voice as angry as his, "I came to show you these bruises you left on my arm last night!" Pulling up the sleeve of her blouse, she held out an arm with several dark, purplish bruises on it.

"You're liable to get more than bruises if you keep meddling in my business!" Morgan threatened.

"Again I say, I am not afraid of you, Mr. Tenny. Whatever you are planning, you surely would not interrupt it to do anything foolish to me. Especially since I have a friend at my radio station who knows I've been following you. The authorities would be on you in a heartbeat."

"If I did do anything to you," Morgan said confidently, "believe me, nobody would be able to prove it."

"They could certainly prove you are in the country illegally," she retorted. "I saw how you came in at the airport with Benny Cone. That alone is enough to get you *inside* the prison you and your friend Donahue studied so closely this morning."

Turning away from her, Morgan walked across the room. She had him on that. All he could do now was figure out a way to handle her. He walked back to her.

"Look, I'm sorry about the bruises," he said as contritely as he could. "But you came on pretty aggressively and I wasn't prepared for you. Can we start over?"

"Without the rough stuff?" she asked, sounding more American than Afghani.

"Definitely without the rough stuff."

"All right. I want to talk to you. But not here. Your friend Donahue has ears all over this place. I'll pick you up out front at six and take you to a little place I know on the edge of the city. We can have supper and talk about a compromise arrangement between us. Will you agree to that?"

"Yes."

"Good." Liban Adnan nodded brusquely. "Until six, then."

Unlocking the door, she left.

Morgan stared thoughtfully at the closed door behind her. Where in hell, he wondered, was *this* going to lead?

As Morgan walked out of the Mustafa Hotel, the green Volkswagen pulled up at once and he got in. Liban swung the car back into traffic and headed out the western highway toward Jalalabad. Neither of them spoke at first, until finally Morgan asked, "Have you told anyone else about me? Besides your friend at the radio station?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No, of course not." She glanced at him. "I want this story for myself."

Morgan nodded. Several minutes later, he said, "I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name."

"Liban Adnan. Just call me Lee."

She drove to a small settlement just outside the city and parked in front of a surprisingly nice-looking roadside restaurant, the name of which was written in Arabic across its facade. "This is a respectable family establishment," she said, "so please don't flash your guns around."

"What guns?"

"The ones I'm sure you are carrying. Let's not play games, Mr. Tenny."

Inside, Lee selected the table she wanted, off to one far side, and they were seated. "Are you familiar with Afghan food?" she asked.

"No."

"Then let me explain what you can order. *Mourgh* is skinless chicken marinated overnight in lemon pulp and cracked black pepper, then broiled. *Aush* is chopped beef, spinach, and dark *makhud*—sorry, yellow split peas—fried in coriander and turmeric, and served with dried mint sprinkled on it. *Qabili pilau* is lamb and yellow rice boiled with carrots and black seedless raisins." She raised her eyebrows inquiringly.

"I'll have whatever you have," Morgan said. She ordered the *aush,* with sweet red tea and pistachios to munch on while they waited.

"I'm sorry you can't get something stronger to drink," Lee apologized, "but alcohol is not served here. You see, in our faith, especially among the *Tajiks,* who are the predominant population—"

"Look," Morgan interrupted, "can we get down to the business of why we're here?"

"Well, yes, of course. I was just trying to be cordial."

"Forget cordial. Specifically, what is it you want in order to leave me alone?"

Her eyes, dark like ripe plums, fixed on him. "I want the complete story of what you and Mike Donahue are planning and how you are going to go about it—"

"You're crazy," Morgan scoffed.

"Let me finish, please. I want the complete story—to be released *after* it happens. After you've done what you're planning to do, after you've gotten away with it—*if* you get away with it—"

"We'll get away with it."

"Fine. After you get away with it and have safely escaped. When everyone is running around, pointing fingers, blaming everyone else, trying to figure out who did it, how it was done—that's when I want to reveal everything."

"What do you expect to get out of that?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A reputation. Stature as a broadcast journalist. A move from radio to television. Perhaps even a position with CNN International."

"I see. You want to be famous."

"I want to be successful."

"You want to be another Christiane Amanpour."

She shrugged. "Perhaps." From her expression, Morgan knew he had nailed it.

Before they could converse further, an older man entered the restaurant, followed by two younger men, an older woman, and two younger women. They walked in single file, toward a family section in the rear that was configured with larger tables. But as they started to pass the table where Morgan and Lee sat, the older man abruptly stopped, as did everyone behind him. Standing ramrod straight, he glared down at Lee. He did not speak. Lee looked down at the table. Morgan saw that the five people behind the man also had their eyes downcast.

The silent confrontation lasted perhaps forty seconds, but it somehow seemed much longer. Presently, the older man moved on, his entourage following.

"What was that all about?" Morgan asked.

"That was my family," Lee replied quietly. "My father, my two brothers, my mother, my two sisters." She looked over at him woefully. "I have been banished from my family, you see. When I took up Western ways, Western dress, got a Western job as a radio broadcaster, my father ostracized me. I am not allowed to go around any member of my family, or to communicate with them in any way, or they with me. None of them may cast eyes upon me except my father, and then only to revile me with his look."

Morgan saw a sadness in her eyes, but it did not seem to be for the painful scorn of her father and the loss of her family. Rather it was a sadness of fear, the kind Morgan had seen in the eyes of many who were about to die; it was a sadness not of something that had already happened to her, but of something that was going to happen to her, and she *knew* it.

At once, as he looked at her, she became appealing to him, her despair coupled with a longing, all of it concealed to some degree by her effervescent aggressiveness—no, not aggressiveness, he rethought it—more like assertiveness, an *anxious* assertiveness. Morgan felt something emanating from Liban Adnan that he could not define or understand. But he knew he had to respond to it.

"All right, I'll help you, Lee," he told her, suddenly deciding. "I'll give you your story."

A glimmer of a smile came tentatively to her lips. "Thank you, Mr. Tenny."

"Call me Morgan," he said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖❖❖

Later that night, back in the office of the Dingo Club, Morgan again sat across the desk from Michaleen Donahue.

"I want a hundred thousand for myself," Donahue said.

"You want it now?"

The Irishman's thick black brows went up. "That would be nice."

Morgan unlocked and unzipped the bag that constantly hung from his shoulder, and from it counted out ten banded sheaves of hundred-dollar bills, fifty to a sheaf, and twenty sheaves of fifty-dollar bills, also fifty to a sheaf. "That leaves me with nine hundred thousand, Donny. Will that do us?"

"I think so. I put a pencil to it earlier—" He pushed a yellow lined pad across the desk, which Morgan picked up and began to study. "I figure twenty thousand each for the two guard contacts we'll need on the inside," he told Morgan. "Four explosives men at forty each is a hundred-sixty. Two rocket-launcher men at thirty-five apiece is seventy. Six ground troops to back up you and me at—"

"You and me?" Morgan interrupted. "You're coming along?"

"Certainly," Donahue said, taken aback slightly. "You think I took a hundred thousand just to sit on my ass?"

Morgan shrugged self-consciously. "Well, I—I mean—well—"

"Well, hell! A well's a hole in the ground, lad! Your brother's a friend of mine. And so are a few others in that hellhole of a prison. Yeah, I'm coming along. You bet your ass I am." Donahue cleared his throat. "Now, as I was saying: Six ground troops at twenty-five per is another one-fifty. The half-track, used but in good condition, will cost us two hundred thousand. And the two armored Humvees will run seventy-five each, that's one-fifty." Donahue got out a bottle and poured drinks for them while Morgan studied the figures. Taking a long sip of his own, he sat back and licked his lips appreciatively at the taste. "I make it seven-seventy," he concluded. "That leaves one-thirty for weapons and ammo."

"One-thirty will be a stretch," Morgan guessed, frowning.

"Might, might not," said Donahue. "Depends on where I have to buy. If I can run at least half of what we need from Uzbekistan, we'll be okay. If I have to deal with the Pakistanis, those bloody bastards will try to rob us blind." He paused for a moment, then said, "It might be possible to steal some ammo from the U.N. forces arsenal down in Qandahar. I don't know how you'd feel about that, you being a Yank and all—"

"Steal it anywhere you can," Morgan said flatly. "I don't owe the U.N. anything."

"Right. Well, then." Donahue rose and drained his glass. "I'll get the ball rolling first thing in the morning. You want to interview personnel?"

"Not unless you want me to."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'll do it meself then. How do you plan to get Virgil out of the country?"

"Same way I got in. Billy Cone."

"Billy might not be up for anything that heavy. What if he says no?"

Morgan locked eyes with the Irishman. "Then I'll kill him, take his plane, and fly it myself."

The next night, Lee invited Morgan to her apartment, where they would have the privacy to talk more openly.

Lee lived in one of the older, modest buildings in a more or less grubby section of south Kabul, but she said she liked the location because it was convenient to the traditional Afghan food markets as well as a newer, Western-style superstore that sold canned items imported from the U.S. Plus, the sparsely but comfortably furnished apartment offered a parking shed for her little green Volkswagen. Morgan noticed at once that the apartment's cracked and pitted walls were colorfully concealed with a variety of posters: Emiliano Zapata, Muhammad Ali standing over a prone Sonny Liston, Mother Teresa touching the forehead of a sick child, Roy Rogers with six-guns blazing.

"Roy Rogers?" Morgan said in surprise.

"Yes. I watch his old films on the new satellite station. They have subtitles, of course. I think his horse is nice. And I like the way he sings."

She had prepared a cold supper for them.

"Samboosak," she told him. "Cold meat pies with leeks and mild spices. And there are boiled eggs and a spinach-and-chickpea salad with pine nuts. And," she added proudly, "just for you—" She produced a bottle of Australian wine. "Another reason my father has disowned me: I like a glass of wine now and then."

As they ate, Morgan outlined for Lee in detail his plan to breach Pul-e-Charki prison with a small armed force, an armored vehicle, and two armed Humvees, to liberate his twin brother Virgil from Block One, where the high-profile prisoners were kept, and then how the two of them would escape the country in Benny Cone's plane.

"What about the other prisoners in Block One?" Lee wanted to know. "And in the other blocks?"

Morgan shrugged. "They'll be pretty much on their own. If they can get to the main gate, a lot of them can pile onto the half-track and the Hummers when they retreat."

"And the guards?"

"Most of them at the main gate and around Blocks One and Two will probably be killed in the initial assault."

Lee looked down at the table. "A lot of those men are just ordinary family men, working men, most of them not political at all."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"They chose to work there," Morgan said evenly. "They knew the risks involved." He paused, then continued in a softer tone. "Look, Lee, everyone makes their own choices in life. Everyone pays their own prices for those choices. That's just life."

"Or in this case, death," she amended.

They finished supper and went outside to sit on the building's back steps and drink the rest of the wine.

"I try very hard to understand you Westerners," she said. "All of you who are here in my country: Americans, British, Irish, Australians, the mixed Europeans. I try to understand the little regard you all seem to have for human life if something stands in the way of what you want."

"I've been trying to understand your people, too," Morgan said, "since I saw your own father stare so hatefully at you, and you told me how you'd been ostracized by him from your family. I don't understand that. My brother Virgil and I are twins; we were together in the womb, born together. We grew up together as dirt-poor Catholics in a steel-mill town in a place called Pennsylvania. Our father was a drunk; our mother washed other men's dirty, stinking mill clothes to feed us. We got made fun of as free students in a hard-knock Catholic school because of the shabby hand-me-down uniforms we wore. We never got invited to join school teams or clubs, or come to school parties. But we got away from all that. When we were old enough, we joined the Marine Corps. We went through boot camp together, then weapons school, where they taught us to use rifles, pistols, machine guns, flamethrowers, hand-held rocket launchers. Finally we went to sniper school together and learned to kill. We lived by the sniper motto: One shot, one kill. When we left the Corps, we both had confirmed body counts in the high twenties. The day we were discharged, we were recruited for a mercenary team to fight in Zaire. We've been fighting, and killing, ever since."

Morgan fell silent then. The two of them sat there in the shadows, the wine warming them, listening to mixed night sounds of Kabul. Someone, somewhere not too far away, was playing one of the new Western stations on the radio, and the mournful voice of a mournful woman was singing "Blues in the Night." They listened until the song ended, then Morgan spoke again.

"I know what my brother is accused of doing, and I don't condone what he's done. But he's my brother. I can't disown him like your father has disowned you. It's not in me to do that."

In the darkness, Lee reached out and took his hand.

Later, she moved close to him and he put an arm around her shoulders.

Within a week, Michaleen Donahue was almost ready to move.

"The CV-6 Russian half-track," he reported to Morgan, "is hid-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

den under a camo tarp about five miles from the prison. The Hummers are concealed nearby; we got lucky and stole one of them from the Marines down near Ghazni, so we saved a nice piece of change there. The launchers and rockets are stowed in a house on the outskirts. The K-2 explosives are stashed in another house not far away. All weapons and ammo, including the flamethrower, are at a third location convenient to the other two. And I've got personnel all over the bloody city, paid and waiting to be summoned."

"What kind of men have we got?" Morgan asked.

"Good men, the lot of them. Three have relatives in the prison that they're going to try and spring. Those are Afghanis, of course. Then," he began to count on his fingers, "I've got two of me own Irish lads from Belfast; two Aussies who've worked together as a team for twelve years; a couple of real killers from Tajikistan who deserted the Russian army; a Pakistani, and two Turks."

"Turks, good." Morgan nodded. "I'll fight with Turks any day."

"I feel the same way," Donahue agreed. "We'll put them on the Hummers with ourselves."

"Right. Inside help?"

"Two guards have been bribed. They'll see to it that the Block One prisoners will be let into the courtyard for exercise ten minutes after our mechanized force breaks cover and heads for the prison. All the men will be armed before daybreak and rendevous at two separate locations to be picked up by the Hummers. The K-2 will have been placed on each side of the main gate during the night; I'll carry one igniter switch and one of my Irish lads will have the other one in the second Hummer. Launcher gunners and their rockets will be in slit trenches fifty yards away on each side; they'll take out the gun turrets. The flamethrower man will be on the half-track." Donahue lighted a fat Cuban cigar. "All's left is for us to set a time."

"You said we had money left?"

"Sure. What we saved by stealing one of the Hummers. What d'you need?"

"I'm thinking some kind of diversion on the side of town farthest from the prison, to distract the civilian law and the local army garrison."

"Good idea. Let's see what we can find here . . ." Donahue unrolled on his desk a map of the city and began tracing it with one tobacco-stained finger. "Over here we have a sugar-beet plant and a few food-processing and canning factories. There's a rather large woolen mill here. At this point here, farther out, there's an industrial district with some metalworking shops, a lumber mill, a number of woodworking businesses—"

"How big's the lumber mill?"

"It's quite a good size."

"Let's set it on fire."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Donahue frowned. "All the wood's pretty dry this time of year. The place'll go up like a tinderbox. Could spread and burn down a couple square miles of the city. Including a lot of homes."

"Too bad," Morgan said. "I don't owe these people anything. Let's set it on fire."

Donahue shrugged. "All right. It's your call."

Morgan could tell that the idea didn't sit well with Donahue. But it wasn't Donahue's brother in Pul-e-Charki. "Can you get somebody to do it?" he asked.

"Sure," the big Irishman said quietly. "I know a couple of Iranian thugs who'll do anything for a laugh."

"Okay. Set that up and then we'll decide on a time."

As Morgan started to leave, Donahue said, "Incidentally . . ."

Morgan stopped. "What?"

"One of my lads saw you in a restaurant with that radio woman, Liban Adnan."

"Yeah. She's been after me to do an interview on mercenaries. I'm just stringing her along."

"Well, you might want to be extra careful with her. She's a police informant."

That night, walking arm in arm back to Lee's apartment after a late dinner, Morgan was trying to decide how to kill her.

Breaking her neck was probably the best way; it was quick, quiet. And with the difference in their size and weight, it would be easy enough.

But he hated like hell to do it.

During the past week they had been developing—something; Morgan wasn't quite sure what. Ever since they had sat in the shadows on the back steps of her building and he had told her about himself and Virgil, and she had ended up with her head on his shoulder, they had both begun feeling—something.

It had started with casual touching, quick, spontaneous hugs, brief kisses on the cheeks, then the lips, lightly at first, barely, then longer, more serious, urgent.

"What are we doing?" she had asked just the previous night. They had stepped into the doorway of a shop to get out of a sudden downpour. She had come into his embrace, her arms crossing behind his neck, her lips and body hungry. And then: "What are we doing?"

"I don't know," Morgan said. "Are we falling in love?"

Then it was her turn to say, "I don't know."

"I've never had feelings like this before—"

"Nor I—"

"It's a crazy thing to have happen—"

"I know. It's insane—"

"With what's going on and all. It's not rational—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No, not rational at all—"

Still, they had kissed some more, and when the rain stopped they had walked with their arms around each other back to her apartment. But she would not let him come in.

"Wait, Morgan, please. Until tomorrow night. Let's give ourselves a night to think about this."

"I don't have to think about it. I want you."

"And I want you—"

"Then let's go inside." Gently he took her arm.

"Please, Morgan. Not tonight. Today is Friday. There is a *khutba* tonight. A special congregational prayer. I want to go to it. To see if perhaps there will be a message in it for me. For us."

"I don't understand," Morgan said, confused. "I thought you walked away from all that. I thought you were liberated."

"I am. But I still have my own beliefs. So, please. Wait. Until tomorrow night."

So Morgan had waited.

And later that night Donahue had told him she was a police informant.

Now tomorrow night had come. And instead of thinking about making love to this pretty, sad-eyed, anxious young Afghani woman, Morgan was thinking about how to kill her.

At Lee's apartment, she led Morgan into her tiny bedroom and lighted ivory votives in each corner that threw enough flickering yellow light to illuminate a bed made up with pristine white satin hemmed in puce, stitched with gold thread.

"This is our bridal bed," Lee said softly. "At the *khutba* last night, the message I got was to follow my heart. That is what I will do." She touched Morgan's cheek. "You undress while I prepare our bath."

"Our bath?"

"Yes. Before we make love, we must cleanse ourselves together."

At that moment, Morgan desired her with an intensity he had never imagined he could feel. Through the open door to the bathroom, he watched as she ran water into a large old sunken family tub made of blue tiles. Then she began to undress. As did he.

When they stood naked in the now steamy little bathroom, Lee opened a basket and from it sprinkled small red, yellow, and white flowers onto the surface of the bathwater.

"These are wild *honisoukes.*" she said. "You Westerners call them honeysuckles."

They got into the tub together.

All thoughts of killing her left Morgan's mind.

"Everything's ready when you are, lad," Donahue told Morgan the next day. "The two Iranians are straining on their leash to torch the lumber mill, God forgive us. All the men, weapons, and vehi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cles are in place, and we're locked and loaded. We just need to give our two inside men one day's notice."

Morgan nodded. "I'll set up our exit with Benny Cone. His Kabul contact said he's flying in with a load of hijacked cigarettes tomorrow at noon." Pausing a beat, he then added, "And just so you know, I'll be taking Liban Adnan with Virgil and me when we go."

Donahue's ruddy Irish face darkened in a scowl. "How much does she know? And don't lie to me, Morgan."

"She knows everything, except the day. And the lumber-mill fire."

"You bloody fool!"

"Listen to me. It doesn't matter. She's on our side. I guarantee it."

"You *guarantee* it! Who the hell do you think you're talking to! I warned you about her! We could be walking right into a trap, all of us!"

"That won't happen, Donny. Listen to me. I confronted her about being a police informant. She admitted that at times she had cooperated with certain police officials, but only in matters involving drug smugglers, slave traders of children, things like that. Listen, think about it. If she had informed on us, if the military or the prison authorities knew about the plan, they'd already have moved in. They wouldn't wait until we launched our attack; they'd have to take casualties and structural damage that way. They could have taken us anytime without a fight. All they'd have to do is seize our weapons stockpile and we'd be out of business." He stared down Donahue. "I'm telling you it's all right, Donny. You have my word."

"I need more than your word to risk my life!" Donahue declared.

They fell silent for a long moment. The little office was still as death, as if both of them had stopped breathing.

"I didn't have to tell you about her," Morgan pointed out.

"I know that."

"It should be easy enough for you to find out if there's been a betrayal of any kind."

Donahue nodded brusquely. "I'll do you the courtesy of checking it out. I'll meet with the two guards I've paid off. If anything's amiss, they'll know it. And if they try to lie to me, *I'll* know it." He came over to Morgan and got square in his face. "If you're wrong, lad, you'll never have a chance to be right again."

It was as clear and cold a threat as Morgan Tenny had ever heard.

On Sunday at noon, Morgan was back out at the cargo terminal of Kotûbkhel Airport. He hung around the Customs area, staying well out of sight so that Moazzah, the agent who had let him into the country, would not see him. Benny Cone's old Constellation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

touched down an hour late, at one o'clock, and awhile later Morgan saw him come into the terminal and loiter around Moazzah's desk for a few minutes while passing along several parcels of bribery goods. There was a cafe in the passenger terminal next-door, and Morgan gave one of the shoeshine boys near the baggage kiosks a handful of Afghani dollars, equal to about one buck U.S., to take Benny a note he had prepared in advance, which read: MEET ME CAFE. TENNY.

After watching to make sure the note was delivered, Morgan went over to the passenger terminal. It was a great anthill of people, long queues trying to check in at the counters of Ariana Afghan Airlines, which consisted of several old Air India airbuses repainted and being flown by Russian contract pilots. The only uncrowded counters were where the VIPs and others were checking in at UNHAS to board one of the modern daily United Nations Humanitarian Air Service jets that served Kabul. The terminal itself was filthy and stank of every imaginable odor; its air was infested with large, aggressive flies, and was smoke-filled by many passengers standing obliviously under No Smoking signs. Security guards, all of them in British Royal Air Force uniforms, stood everywhere, armed with H&K G3 automatic weapons.

Morgan went into the grubby little cafe on the upper level, purchased a bottle of unchilled Fiji water, and found a small table in the back corner, away from pedestrian traffic. Awhile later, Benny Cone sauntered in, located him, and came over to sit down.

"Well?" Benny asked. "Was I right?"

"Right about what?"

"About Kabul. Is it a shit hole or isn't it?"

"It's a shit hole," Morgan agreed.

"Told you so." The pilot tilted his head. "You ready to get out?"

"I will be, day after tomorrow, Tuesday. Can you be on the ground ready to fly at four in the afternoon?"

"I guess. Where to?"

"Anywhere you can set us down without papers. Karachi, where we can get sea transportation, would be nice; Abu Dhabi, if the Emirates are open; Bahrain or anywhere in the Gulf of Oman. I'll leave it up to you."

"Okay. You said us. Who's us?"

"Me, my brother Virgil, a woman, maybe Donahue, if I can talk him into it."

"Who's the woman?"

"An Afghani broadcast journalist. She's clean but doesn't have a passport."

"Who the hell does these days?" Benny grunted. "Baggage?"

"Carry-ons, two or three personal weapons per man."

"What can you pay?"

"What do you want?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What I want is a hundred thousand per person, but what I'll take is five per. Twenty thousand."

"Deal. Payment in the air?"

"Deal." Benny bobbed his chin at the bottle of water Morgan was drinking. "You shouldn't be drinking that shit."

"Why? It's Fiji water."

"It's a Fiji water *bottle,* probably been refilled a dozen times from the tap." He took a pewter flask from his inside pocket and passed it over. "Here, gargle and rinse your mouth out with this."

Morgan took a swig, rinsed, gargled, nearly choked, and spat it on the floor behind his chair. "Jesus!" he said. "What the hell is it, cyanide?"

"You're close. It's Kazakhstan bootleg vodka. Tastes like hell, but it kills bacteria. I never leave home without it." Benny rose. "I have to get back or Moazzah will piss his pants. He's edgy today." He took back his flask and held out a hand. "See you Tuesday."

"Tuesday," Morgan said.

Back in town, late in the afternoon, Morgan looked for Donahue at the Dingo Club.

"He ain't here, mate," one of the Irishman's cronies told him.

"Know where I can find him?"

"I do. But he don't like to be bothered on Sunday afternoons."

"It's important. He'll want to see me."

The crony studied Morgan for a moment, then said, "You'll find him at the Italian Embassy, out on Great Massoud Road."

Morgan frowned. "The Italian Embassy?"

"That's what I said, mate. But don't expect him to be in a jolly mood. Like I told you, he don't like to be bothered on Sunday afternoons."

Outside, Morgan found a dilapidated taxi whose driver, incredibly, knew exactly where the Italian Embassy was located. But what in hell, Morgan wondered, would Donahue be doing there? He was an Irish Free State national traveling on Swiss and Swedish passports, none of which had anything to do with Italy. Just what, Morgan puzzled, could the old Black Irishman be up to?

When he got to the embassy grounds, Morgan found it to be casually guarded by several *carabiniere* wearing sidearms but without heavier weapons. He was courteously directed toward a small group of people congregating in a flowery ornamental garden near a small chapel. One of the people was Donahue, clean-shaven, wearing a starched white shirt, appearing unarmed, talking to two nuns. When he saw Morgan, he smiled, excused himself, and came over to him.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked irritably. Morgan,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

seeing a priest join the two nuns and go into the chapel, quickly said, "Going to Mass. You?"

"Well, I'm going to Mass too," the Irishman growled. "But I didn't expect to see you here." He squinted suspiciously. "How'd you find the place anyway? It's the only Catholic church in the whole of Afghanistan."

"Taxi driver told me."

"I've a feeling you're lying."

Morgan shrugged. "Why would I lie?"

"Well, tell me, then, Morgan Tenny, if you go to Mass, who will you pray to?"

"The usual people. Jesus. Blessed Mother Mary—"

"No, no," Donahue challenged. "I mean, who *specifically?*"

Morgan caught on quickly and outsmarted him. "St. Philomena," he said confidently.

"Ah," said Donahue, surprised, a little chagrined. "The Patroness of Desperate Causes. A good choice."

Morgan tilted his head. "And you, Donny? Who do you pray to?"

"Me?" The big Irishman shrugged. "I go straight to the top. Jesus himself. I used to pray to St. Michael the Archangel, you know, to protect me in battle. But he let me get shot by an Orangeman in Derry some years ago, so I dropped him. Now it's between me and Jesus on the Cross. My best hope at this point is to get into purgatory." He patted Morgan on the shoulder. "Yours too, I'd wager."

"I'm not even counting on purgatory," Morgan said. "I expect to go directly to hell." He put his own hand on Donahue's shoulder. "And you will, too, Donny. Neither of us will ever see heaven."

From inside the chapel, chimes sounded. The two men fell in behind others and entered, dipped a fingertip in holy water, walked down the narrow center aisle, genuflected, made the sign of the cross, and entered a pew made of hardwood where they knelt and closed their eyes in prayer.

There was nothing much different about them from the rest of the mixture of U.N. employees, Europeans, and Americans in the congregation, except for the few whispered words they exchanged upon entering.

"Are we set?" Morgan had asked.

"We're set," Donahue said.

"Okay," Morgan told him. "We go day after tomorrow."

"Tuesday?"

"Tuesday. At noon."

Their killing schedule was on, now firmed up in the little Catholic chapel.

Morgan spent all day Monday and Monday night with Lee.

During the day they walked around, exploring the parts of the once-great city that were being rebuilt after being pillaged, looted,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and desecrated first by Russian soldiers, then by Taliban officials, finally by rogue mercenaries from around the world.

"Not all of it is the wreckage you see around you," Lee told him. They were having a Western lunch at the new Marco Polo restaurant. All the patrons were Westerners, with not an Afghani to be seen. "I will show you something very beautiful that is still intact after four centuries."

After lunch she took him there, to Babur's Gardens, a terraced hillside resplendent with flowers, leading up to a pristine white mosque and a small marble gravestone, and two others on the terraced garden just above it.

"This is the burial place of Babur, who founded the Mogul Empire—*not,*" she emphasized with a pointed finger, "the dreaded *Mongol* Empire, which was something altogether different. Of course, it is true that Babur was a great warrior and led his people in overcoming Turks and Indians and many others, but he was also a very gentle man, a poet, a writer of history. Nearly everything good in our culture began under his rule. This," she drew in the gardens, the mosque, the gravestones with a sweep of her arm, "he designed himself more than four thousand years ago as the final resting place for himself, his wife, and their daughter."

"It's very beautiful," Morgan said, impressed.

But the memory of the place became tainted in his mind later that day when they walked past the ruins of the Kabul Museum and Lee said sadly, "It was once one of Asia's greatest museums. Now see what unscrupulous men, vulgar men, have reduced it to."

Men like me, Morgan thought, oddly uncomfortable.

In the evening they had dinner at the elegant Khyber Restaurant, eating a mixture of Western and Afghan foods. They were both aware now that the hours before Tuesday were passing quickly.

"At times like this," Lee asked, "do you worry much?"

"No," Morgan said. "Worry is like thinking about a debt you may not have to pay." It was a lie. He always worried. Before a battle, he felt as if live things were crawling around in his intestines, eating away at them.

Later he told her, "Tomorrow pack only a small bag. Stay home all day. I'll come for you in the afternoon." And he asked, "You're still sure about going?"

"Yes, still sure."

"You may never see your family again."

"I never see them now."

Walking to her apartment after dinner, he admitted, "I lied to you earlier. I do worry." For some reason he felt sad. "Can we bathe together again tonight?"

Lee touched his face with both palms. "Of course, my love."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Going into her building, neither of them suspected that they were being watched.

At ten the next morning, Morgan strode into the Dingo Club, two pistols and ammo in a belt around his waist, an Uzi 9mm machine gun and web belt of extra magazines slung over one shoulder, carrying the Mossberg shotgun in one hand.

The club, not yet open, was empty except for Donahue at his usual table. Halfway back to it, Morgan stopped cold. Donahue had a glass and bottle in front of him, telling Morgan that something was very wrong. No professional soldier drank before a fight; you didn't want alcohol in your system if you might be wounded. Walking on up to the table, Morgan stood there, waiting for Donahue to speak.

"The operation's off, lad," the Irishman finally said.

"What's happened, Donny?"

Donahue looked up at him forlornly, his expression desolate, eyes mournful.

"Your brother Virgil was put on trial at seven o'clock this morning. He was found guilty at eight. And he was hanged at nine."

Morgan was thunderstruck. "Virgil—? He's been—*hanged?*"

"I just got the news a bit ago. I'm sorrier than I can say, lad."

Shock overwhelming him, Morgan sat down heavily on one of the chairs, laying the Mossberg on the table, dropping the Uzi and web belt to the floor next to him. His lips parted wordlessly, incredulously.

"One of the guards I bribed got word to me," Donahue said. "I'm truly, truly sorry, Morgan. I really wanted to have a go at this one. With you. Your brother. I was gonna make it my last big raid. I really wanted it—" Tears came to the big Irishman's eyes. He poured a drink, but did not raise the glass. Instead he angrily propelled both glass and bottle off the table with the sweep of an arm. "Oh, damn them! God damn them to hell!"

The two men sat in silence, not looking at each other, for what seemed like a long time. Around them, club employees began to straggle in and begin making the club ready for its noon opening.

Hanged, Morgan thought, shaking his head dully. It was almost too heinous to imagine. Virgil, hanged.

Finally, Morgan rose from his chair. "We're set to fly out with Benny Cone at four, if you want to come along."

Donahue shook his head slightly. "Thanks anyway, lad."

Leaving the Mossberg and Uzi and ammo, Morgan walked out of the club.

At Lee's apartment, the door was ajar. Frowning, Morgan drew his Glock, thumbed the safety off, and eased inside. Lee's father was sitting on the couch, staring straight ahead as if in a stupor.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Where is she?" Morgan asked.

The father smiled slightly. "I watched you last night," he said. "I saw you come in here with her and I waited all night until you came out this morning. I know that you have dishonored her and she has dishonored my family. Shame has been cast over me. Now that shame is erased."

Morgan's already ashen face blanched even more pallid and horror clouded his eyes. He went into the bedroom.

Lee lay on her back, still wearing the plain white cotton gown she had pulled on to say goodbye to him at her door. Her face was whiter even than Morgan's, whiter than the white cotton gown, whiter than the pristine white satin sheets on the bed. Her throat had been cut and the blood in which she lay had dried almost black under her head.

Morgan sighed a great, hollow sigh and thought: *This is my punishment for the life I've led.* He felt deep remorse that Lee had been punished too.

Walking back to where her father sat, Morgan raised the Glock and put the muzzle between the man's eyes.

"Shoot me," Lee's father said. "Kill me. I do not care. I did what was right. I face death without shame."

Morgan thumbed the safety of the Glock back on. "No," he said. "You live with it."

He left the man sitting there.

Stretched out on the empty cargo deck of the Constellation about five minutes after it was airborne, Morgan heard Benny Cone call back to him from the cockpit.

"Hey, Tenny! We got off by the skin of our teeth! They just closed the airport!"

Morgan went forward to the cockpit. "What happened?"

"It just came over the air from the tower. There's some kind of rebel army attacking Pul-e-Charki prison. The place is under siege. Prisoners are escaping like ants."

Son of a bitch, Morgan thought. *Donny's doing it anyway. He's getting his last big raid.*

"The radio say anything about a big fire on the other side of the city? A lumberyard?" he asked Cone.

"Nope. Just the attack on the prison."

Good for you, Michaleen, Morgan thought. *Just you against the prison, with no diversionary tactic. One on one. Way to go.*

Going back aft in the plane, Morgan stretched out again. For a brief moment, he felt guilty about not being there with Donahue. Then he thought of Lee and the guilt faded.

Lee would forever be with him.

And he would never kill again. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SCREAM QUEEN

by Ed Gorman

Booklist recently called Ed Gorman a "modern master," and his latest Sam McCain novel, *Fools Rush In* (Pegasus), received a starred review in *Library Journal*. The following Gorman story will also appear soon in the limited-edition collection *Midnight Premiere*, edited by Tom Piccirilli (CD Publications). An advance review from *Booklist* raves: "There isn't a single unrewarding entry[in the book]!" †

Allow me to introduce myself. My name's Jason Fanning. Not that I probably need an introduction. Not to be immodest but I did, after all, win last year's Academy Award for Best Screenplay.

Same with my two friends: Bill Leigh, the Academy Award-winning actor, and Spence Spencer, who won the Academy Award two years ago for Best Director. People with our credentials don't need any introductions, right?

Well . . .

That's the kind of thing we talked about nights, after Video Vic's closed down for the night and we sat around Bill's grubby apartment drinking the cheapest beer we could find and watching schlock DVDs on his old clunker of a TV set. Someday we were going to win the Academy Award for our respective talents and everybody who laughed at us and called us geeks and joked that we were probably gay . . . well, when we were standing on the stage with Cameron Diaz hanging all over us . . .

We had special tastes in videos, the sort of action films and horror films that were the staples of a place like Video Vic's.

If it's straight-to-video, we probably saw it. And liked it. All three of us were on Internet blogs devoted to what the unknowledgeable (read: unhip) thought of as shitty movies. But we knew better. Didn't Nicholson, Scorsese, De Niro, and so forth all get their start doing low-ball movies for Roger Corman?

That's how we were going to win our Academy Awards when we finally got off our asses and piled into Spence's eight-year-old Dodge Dart and headed for the land of gold and silicone. We knew

©2007 by Ed Gorman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it would be a little while before the money and the fame started rolling in. First we'd have to pay our dues doing direct-to-video. We were going to pitch ourselves as a team. My script, Bill's acting, Spence's name-above-the-title directing.

In the meantime, we had to put up with working minimum-wage jobs. Mine was at Video Vic's, a grimy little store resting on the river's edge of a grimy little Midwestern city that hadn't been the same since the glory days of the steamboats Mark Twain wrote so much about.

Even though we worked different gigs, we all managed to go hang at Bill's, even though from time to time Bill and I almost got into fistfights. He never let us forget that he was the normal one, what with his good looks and his Yamaha motorcycle and all his ladies. We were three years out of high school. We'd all tried the community-college route, but since they didn't offer any courses in the films of Mario Bava or Brian De Palma, none of us made it past the first year.

I guess—from the outside, anyway—we were pretty geeky. I had the complexion problem and Spence was always trying to make pharmaceutical peace with his bi-polarity and Bill—well, Bill wasn't exactly a geek. Not so obviously, anyway. He was good-looking, smooth with girls, and he got laid a lot. But he was only good-looking on the outside . . . inside he was just as much an outcast as the seldom-laid Spence and I . . .

Do I have to tell you that people we went to high school with smirked whenever they saw us together? Do I have to tell you that a lot of people considered us immature and worthless? Do I have to tell you that a big night out was at GameLand, where we competed with ten- and twelve-year-olds on the video games? If Spence was off his medication and he lost to some smart-ass little kid, he'd get pretty angry and bitter. A lot of the little kids were scared of us. And you know what? That felt kinda good, having somebody scared of us. It was the only time we felt important in any way.

And then Michele Danforth came into our lives and changed everything. Everything.

Spence was the first one to recognize her. Not that we believed him at first. He kept saying, "That little blond chick that comes in here every other night or so—that's Michele Danforth." But we didn't believe it, not even when he set three of her video boxes up on the counter and said, "You really don't recognize her?"

Michele Danforth, in case you don't happen to be into cult videos, was the most popular scream queen of all a couple of years ago. A scream queen? That's the sexy young lady who gets dragged off by the monster/ax-murderer in direct-to-video horror movies. She screams a lot, and she almost always gets her blouse and bra ripped off so you can see her breasts. Acting ability doesn't matter

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

so much. But scream ability is vital. And breast ability is absolutely mandatory.

The funny thing with most scream queens is, you never see them completely naked. Not even their bottoms. It's as if all the seventeen-year-old masturbation champions who rent their videos want their scream queens to be virginal. Showing breasts doesn't violate the moral code here. But anything else—Well, part of the equation is that you want your scream queen to be the kind of girl you'd marry. And the marrying kind never expose their beavers except in doctors' offices.

Couple of quick things here about Michele Danforth. She was very pretty. Not cute, not beautiful, not glamorous. Pretty. Soft. A bit on the melancholy side. The kind you fall in love with so uselessly. Uselessly, anyway, if your life's work is watching direct-to-video movies. And those sweet breasts of hers. Not those big plastic monsters. Perfectly shaped, medium-sized good-girl breasts. And she could actually act. All the blog boys predicted she'd move into mainstream. And who could disagree?

Then she vanished. Became a big media story for a couple of weeks and then some other H-wood story came along and everybody forgot her. Vanished. The assumption became that some stalker had grabbed her and killed her. Even though she always said she couldn't afford it—scream queens don't usually make much more than executive secretaries—she had to hire a personal bodyguard because of all the strange and disturbing mail she got.

Vanished.

And now, according to Spence, she'd resurfaced fifteen hundred miles and three years later. Except that instead of being dark-haired, brown-eyed, and slender, she was now blond, blue-eyed, and maybe twenty-five pounds heavier. With very earnest brown-rimmed glasses sliding down her nose.

We had to admit that there was a similarity. But it was vague. And it was a similarity that probably belonged to a couple of million young women.

The night the question of her identity got resolved, I was starting the check-out process when the door opened up and she came in. She went right to the Drama section. I'd never seen her go to any of the other sections. Her choices were always serious flicks with serious actors in them. Bill and Spence had taken off to get some beer at the supermarket, the cost of it being way too much at convenience stores.

I'd agreed to the little game they'd come up with. I thought it was kind of stupid, but who knew, maybe it would resolve the whole thing.

It was a windy, chill March night. She wore a white turtleneck beneath a cheap, shapeless thigh-length brown velour jacket. She was just one more Midwestern working girl. Nothing remarkable

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about her at all. She always paid cash from a worn pea-green imitation-leather wallet. Tonight was no different. She never said much, though tonight, as I took her money, she said, "Windy." She went under the name Heather Simpson.

"Yeah. Where's that warm weather they promised?"

She nodded and smiled.

I rang up the transaction and then, as I handed her the slip to sign, I nudged the video box sitting next to the cash register out in front of me. *Night of the Depraved* was the title. It showed a huge, blood-dripping butcher knife about to stab into the white-bloused form of a very pretty girl. Who was screaming. The girl was Michele Danforth. The quote along the top of the box read: *DEPRAVED to the Max . . . and scream queen Danforth is good enuf to eat . . . if you know what I mean! —Dr. Autopsy.com*

"Oops," I said, hoping she'd think this was all accidental. "You don't want that one." I picked up the box and looked at it. "I wonder what ever happened to her."

She just shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I never watch those kind of movies." She took her change and said, "I'm in kind of a hurry."

I handed her the right movie and just as I did so she turned toward me, showing me an angle of her face I'd never seen before. And I said, "It's you! Spence was right! You're Michele Danforth!"

And just then the door opened, the bell above it announcing customers, and in came Bill and Spence. They'd left the beer in the car. Video Vic would've kicked my ass all the way over into Missouri if he ever caught us with brew on the premises.

She turned and started away in a hurry, so fast that she brushed up against Spence. The video she carried fell to the floor.

Bill picked it up. He must have assumed that I had played the little game with her—bringing up Michele Danforth and all—because after he bent to pick up the video and handed it to her with a mock-flourish, he said, "I'm pleased to present my favorite scream queen with this award from your three biggest fans."

She made a sound that could have been a sob or a curse, and then she stalked to the door, throwing it open wide and disappearing into the night. My mind was filled with the image of her face—the fear, the sorrow.

"She'll never be back," I said.

"I told you it was her," Spence said. "She wouldn't have acted that way if it wasn't."

"I wanna bang her," Bill said, "and I'm going to."

Spence said, "Man, she's nobody now. She's even sort of fat."

"Yeah, but how many dudes can say they bopped Michele Danforth?"

"Wait'll we get to La-La Land," Spence said. "We'll be boppin' movie stars every night. And they won't be overweight."

Our collective fantasy had never sounded more juvenile and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

impossible than it did right then. In that instant I saw what a sad sham my life was. Shoulda gone to college; shoulda done somethin' with my life. Instead, I was just as creepy and just as pathetic as all the other direct-to-video freaks who came in here and who we all laughed at when they left. Video Vic's. Pathetic.

"Hey, man, hurry up," Bill said to me. "I'll get the lights. You bag up the money and the receipts. We'll drop it off at the bank and then tap the beer."

But I was still back there a few scenes. The terror and grief of her face. And the humiliating moment when Spence had spoken our collective fantasy out loud. Something had changed in me in those moments. Good or bad, I couldn't tell yet. "I got this sore throat."

"Yeah," Bill said, "it's such a bad sore throat you can't even swallow beer, huh?"

Spence laughed. "Yeah, that sounds like a bad one, all right. Can't even swallow beer."

I could tell Bill was looking at me. He was the only one of us who could really intimidate people. "So what the hell's really goin' on here, Jason?"

I sounded whiny, resentful. "I got a sore throat, Lord and Master. If that's all right with you."

"It's when I said I'm gonna bang her, wasn't it?" He laughed. "In your mind she's still this scream queen, isn't she? Some freaking virgin. She's nobody now."

"Then why do you want to screw her so bad?" I said.

"Because then I can say it, asshole. I can say I bopped Michele Danforth." He looked at both me and Spence. "I'll have actually accomplished something. Something real. Not just all these fantasies we have about going to Hollywood."

"I shouldn't have done it to her," I said. "We shouldn't have said anything to her at all. She had her own reasons for vanishing like that."

"Yeah, because she was getting fat between movies and they probably didn't want her anymore." He laughed.

Hard to tell which rang in his voice the clearest—his cruelty or his craziness. Bill was climbing out on the ledge again. Sometimes he lived there for days.. Times like these, we'd get into shoving matches and near-fights.

Spence's attitude had changed. You could see it in his dark eyes. He'd thought it was pretty funny and pretty cool, Bill screwing a scream queen. But now I could tell that he thought it was just as twisted as I did. Bill always got intense when he went after something. But this went beyond intensity. He actually looked sort of crazy when he talked about it.

"Maybe Jason's right, Bill," Spence said gently. "Maybe we should just leave her alone."

The look of contempt was so perfectly conjured up, it was almost

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

like a mask. So was the smirk that came a few seconds later. "The Wuss brothers. All these fantasies about what great talents you are. And all the big times you're gonna have in Hollywood. And then when you get a chance to have a little fun, you chicken out and run away. We could all screw her, you know. All three of us. A gang-bang."

"Yeah," I said, "now there's a great idea, Bill. We could kill her, too. You ever thought of that?"

"Now who's crazy? All I was talking about was the three of us—"

I was as sick of myself just then as I was of Bill. I was already making plans to go call the community college again. See when I needed to enroll for the next semester. I knew that maybe I wouldn't go through with it. But right then, with Bill's mind lurching from a one-man seduction to a three-man rape . . . Prisons were filled with guys who'd had ideas like that. And then carried them out.

"I got to finish up here," I said, working on the cash register again.

"Yeah, c'mon, Spence, let's leave the Reverend here to pray for our souls. We'll go get drunk."

Spence and I had never been very good about standing up to Bill. So I knew what courage it took for Spence to say, "I guess not, Bill. I'm not feeling all that well myself."

He called us all the usual names that denote a male who is less than masculine. Then he went over to a stand-up display of the new Julia Roberts movie and started picking up one at a time and firing them around the store. They made a lot of noise and every time one of them smashed into something—a wall, a line of tapes, even a window—both Spence and I felt a nervous spasm going through us. It was like when you're little and you hear your folks having a violent argument and you're afraid your dad's going to kill your mom and you hide upstairs under the covers. That kind of tension and terror.

I came around the counter fast and shouted at him. Then I started running at him. But he beat me to the door.

He stood there. "Good night, ladies. Every time I see you from now on, I'm gonna punch your ugly faces in. You two pussies've got an enemy now. And a bad one." He'd never sounded scarier or crazier.

And with that, he was gone.

It was misting by the time I got back to my room-and-a-bathroom above a vacuum cleaner-repair store. I had enjoyed the walk home.

The mist was dirty gold and swirling in the chilly night. And behind it in doorways and alleyways and dirty windows the eyes of old people and scared people and drug people and queer people and insane people stared out at me, eyes bright in dirty faces. This was an old part of town, the buildings small and fading, glimpses of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ancient Pepsi-Cola and Camel cigarette and Black Jack gum signs on their sides every other block or so; TV repair shops that still had tiny screens inside of big consoles in the windows for nostalgia's sake; and railroad tracks no longer used and stretching into some kind of Twilight Zone miles and miles of gleaming metal down the endless road. There was even a dusty used bookstore that had a few copies of pulps like *The Shadow* and *Doc Savage* and *Dime Detective* in the cracked window, and you could stand here sometimes and pretend it was 1938 and the world wasn't so hostile and lonely even though there was a terrible war on the way. It was a form of being stoned, traveling back in time this way, and a perfect head trip to push away loneliness.

To get to my room you took this rotting wooden staircase up the side of the two-story stucco-peeling shop. I was halfway up them before I looked up and saw her sitting there. The scream queen. If the misting bothered her, she didn't show it.

She smoked a cigarette and watched me. She looked pretty sitting there, not as pretty as when she'd been in the movies, but pretty nonetheless.

"How'd you find me?"

"Asked the guy at the 7-11 if he knew where you lived."

"Oh, yeah. Dev. He lives about three down." I smiled. "In our gated community."

"Sorry I got so hysterical."

I shrugged. "We're video-store geeks. We can get pretty hysterical ourselves. You should've seen us at our first Trekkie convention in Spock ears and shit. If you had any pictures of us from back then, you could blackmail us."

She smiled. "That's assuming you had any money to make it worthwhile."

I laughed. "I take it you know how much video-store geeks make."

"L.A. I must've done three hundred signings in video stores." The smile again. It was a good clean one. It erased a lot of years. "Most of you are harmless."

"We could always go inside," I said.

After I handed her a cheap beer, she said, "I didn't come up here for sex."

"I didn't figure you did."

She glanced around. "You could fix this up a little and it wouldn't be so bad. And those *Terminator* posters are a little out of date."

"Yeah. But they're signed."

"Arnold signed them?"

I grinned. "Nah, some dude at a comic-book convention I went to. He had some real small part in it."

She had a sweet laugh. "Played a tree or a car or something like that?"

"Yeah, you know, along those lines."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She'd taken off her brown velour jacket. Her white sweater showed off those scream-queen breasts real, real good. It was unsettling, sitting so near a girl whose videos had driven me to rapturous self-abuse so many times. Even with the added weight, she looked good in jeans. "I'll make you a deal, Jason."

"Yeah? What kind of deal. I mean, since we ruled out sex. Much to my dismay."

"Oh, c'mon, Jason. You don't really think I just go around sleeping with people do you? That's in the movies. This is straight business, what I'm proposing. I'll clean your apartment here and fix it up if you'll convince your two friends not to let anybody know who I am or where I am."

"Spence won't be any trouble."

"Is he the good-looking one?"

"That's Bill."

"He looks like trouble."

"He is."

She sank back on the couch and covered her face with her hands. I thought she was going to cry. But no sounds came. The only thing you could hear was Churchill, my cat, yowling at cars passing in what was now a downpour.

"You okay?"

She shrugged. Said nothing. Hands still covering her face. When she took them down, she said, "I left L.A. for my own reasons. And I want to keep them my reasons. And that means making a life for myself somewhere out here. I'm from Chicago. I like the Midwest. But I don't want some tabloid to find out about me."

"Well, like I say, Spence won't be any trouble. But Bill—"

"Where's he live?"

I was thinking about what Bill had said about screwing a scream queen. Even if she wasn't a scream queen anymore. It didn't make much sense to me but it sure seemed to make a lot of sense to him.

"Why don't I talk to him first?"

She looked relieved. "Good. I'd appreciate that. I'm supposed to start this job next week. A good job. Decent bennies and from what everybody says, some real opportunities there. I want to start my life all over."

"I'll talk to him."

She was all business. Grabbing her coat. Sliding into it. Standing up. Looking around at the stained and peeling wallpaper and all the posters, including the latest scream queen, Linda Sanders. "She's a nice kid. Had a real shitty childhood. I hope she can beat the rap—you know, go on and do some real acting. I saw her at a small playhouse right before I left L.A. She was really good."

I liked that. How charitable she was about her successor. A decent woman.

Churchill came out and rubbed his head against her ankle. She

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

held him up and gave him that smile of hers. "We both need to go to Weight Watchers, my friend."

"He stays up late at night and watches TV and orders from Domino's when I'm asleep."

She gave him a kiss. "I believe it."

She set him down, put out her hand and shook, that formal, forced way people do in banking commercials right after the married couple agrees to pay the exorbitant interest rates. "I really appreciate this, Jason. I'll start figuring out how I'm going to fix up your apartment. I live in this tiny trailer. I've got it fixed up very nicely."

"You didn't screw her, did you?" Bill said when he came into the store.

He'd been hustling around the place, getting the displays just so, setting up the 50% OFF bin of VHS and DVD films we hadn't been able to move, snapping Mr. Coffee to burbling attention. When I told him she'd come over to my place last night, he stopped, frozen in place, and asked if I'd screwed her.

"Yeah. Right on the front lawn. In the rain. Just humping our brains out."

"You'd better not have, you bastard. I'm the one who gets to nail her."

At any given time Bill is always about seven minutes away from the violent ward, but I couldn't ever recall seeing him this agitated about something.

"She isn't going to screw anybody, Bill. Now shut up and listen."

"Oh, sure," he said, "now you're her press agent? All the official word comes from you?"

"She's scared, asshole."

"Listen, Jason. Spare me the heartbreak, all right? She's been around. She doesn't need some video geek hovering over her." Then: "That's how you're gonna get in her panties, isn't it? Be her best friend. One of those wussy deals. Well, it's not gonna work because she'll never screw a pus-face like you. You checked out your blackheads lately, Jason?"

I swung on him then. When my fist collided with his cheek, he gaped at me in disbelief, then sort of disintegrated, started screaming at me real high-pitched and all, as he stumbled backwards into a display of a new Disney family movie. Most surprisingly of all, he didn't come after me. Maybe I'd just stunned him. He'd always seen Spence and me as his inferiors—we were the geeks, according to him; he wasn't a geek; he was a cool dude who pitied us enough to hang out with us—and so maybe he was just in shock. His slave had revolted and he hadn't had time to deal with it mentally yet.

"She's afraid you'll tell somebody who she is," I said. "And if you do, you're going to be damned sorry."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And then I couldn't believe what I did. I hit him again. This time he might have responded, but just then the front door opened, the bell tinkled. The first customer of the day, a soccer-mom with a curly-haired little girl in tow, walked in with an armload of overdue DVDs. Mrs. Preston. Her stuff was always overdue.

I had just enough time to see that a pimple of blood hung from Bill's right nostril. I took an unholy amount of satisfaction in that.

Michele didn't want to see me. She was nice about it. She said she really appreciated me talking to Bill about her and that she really appreciated me stopping by like this but she was just in a place where she wanted to be alone, sort of actually needed to be alone and she was sure I understood. Because that was obviously the kind of guy I was, the understanding kind.

In other words, it was the sort of thing I'd been hearing from girls all my life. How nice I was and how understanding I was and how they were sure, me being so understanding and all, that it was cool if we just kind of left things as they were: you know, being just friends and all. Which is what she ended up saying.

As usual, I'd gotten ahead of myself. By this time, I had this crush on her and whenever I get a crush of this particular magnitude I start dreaming the big dream. You know, not only having sex but maybe her really falling in love with me and maybe moving in together and maybe me getting a better job and maybe us—it could happen—getting married and settling down just as the couples always do in the screwball comedies of the 'thirties and 'forties Bill and Spence always rag on me for liking so much.

Over a three-day period I must have called Spence eight or nine times, always leaving a message on his machine. He never called back. I finally went over there after work one night. He had a two-room apartment on a block where half the houses had been torn down. I was just walking up to the front door when Spence and Bill came out.

They were laughing until they saw me. Beery laughter. They'd both been gunning brew.

Bill was the one I watched. His hands formed fists instantly and he dropped back a foot and went into a kind of boxer's crouch. "You got lucky the other day, Jason."

"I don't think so, Bill. I think you got lucky because Mrs. Preston came in."

Spence's face reflected the disbelief all three of us were probably feeling. I couldn't believe it, either. I'd stood up to Bill the other day, but I think both of us thought it was kind of a fluke. But it wasn't. I was ready to hit him again.

The only difference between the other morning and now was that he was half-drunk. Brew makes most of us feel tougher and handsomer and smarter and wittier than we really are. Prisons are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

packed with guys who let brew addle their perception of themselves. Or dope. Doesn't matter.

He came at me throwing a roundhouse so vast in scope it couldn't possibly have landed on me. All I had to do was take a single step backward.

"I don't want to fight you, Bill. Spence, pull him back."

Whatever Bill said was lost in his second lunge. This punch connected. He got me on my right cheek and pain exploded across my entire face. He followed up with a punch to my stomach that doubled me over. "Kick his ass, Bill," Spence said.

Even though I was in pain, even though I should have been focused on the fight I was in, his words, the betrayal of them, him choosing Bill over me when it should have been Spence and me against Bill—that hurt a lot more than the punches. He'd been my friend since third grade. He was my friend no longer.

Bill hit me with enough force to knock me flat on the sidewalk, butt first. If this had been the other night, I would've jumped to my feet and started swinging. But I was still hearing Spence say to kick my ass and I guess I didn't have enough pride or anger left to stand up and hit back. I just felt drained.

"You all right?" Spence said to me. I could hear his confusion. Better to stick with Bill. But still, we'd been friends a long time and to see me knocked down—

"He's just a pussy," Bill said. "C'mon."

I didn't stand up till they were gone. Then I walked home slowly. I took the long way so that I'd go past Michele's place. The light was on. I turned off the sidewalk and started moving toward the house, but then I stopped. I wasn't up for another disappointment tonight.

Video Vic's real name wasn't Vic; it was Reed, Reed Patrick, and when I called him next morning and gave him my week's notice, he said, "You don't sound so good, kiddo. You all right?"

"I just need to be movin' on, Reed. I enjoyed working for you, though."

"You ever want to use me for a reference, that'll be fine with me."

"Thanks, Reed."

That night, I surprised my folks by showing up for dinner. Mom had made meat loaf and mashed potatoes and peas. I figured that was about the best meal I'd ever had. They were surprised that I'd quit my job, but my Dad said, "Now you can start looking for something with a future, Jason. You could start taking classes again out to the college. Get trained for some kind of computer job or something."

"Computers, honey," my mom said, patting my hand. "Jobs like that pay good money."

"And they've got a future."

"That's right," Mom said, "computers aren't going anywhere.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They're here for good."

"You should call out there tomorrow," Dad said. "And my buddy Mike can get you on at the supermarket he runs."

I pretended to be interested in what he was saying. I'd never seemed interested before. He looked happy about me, the way he had when I was a little kid. I hadn't seen him look this happy in a long time. He also looked old. I guess I hadn't really, you know, just looked at him for a real long time. The same with Mom. The lines in their faces. The bags under their eyes. The way both my folks seemed kind of worn out through the whole meal. When I left I hugged them harder than I had in years. And all the way back to my little room, I felt this sadness I just couldn't shake.

Over the next week, the sadness stayed with me. I'd realized by then that it wasn't just about Mom and Dad, it was about me and everything that had happened in the past couple of weeks. I tried Michele a couple more times. The second time she was real cold. You know how girls are when they aren't happy to hear from you and just want to get you off the phone. After I hung up, I sat there in the silence with Churchill weighing a ton on my lap. I felt my cheeks burn. It was pretty embarrassing, the way she'd maneuvered me off the phone so fast.

The next night, no longer gainfully employed, I walked across town to the library. I was reading the whole run of Robert Jordan fantasy novels. He was one of the best writers around.

Even though the library had bought six copies of his new hardcover, they were all checked out. I picked up a collection of his short stories. He was good at those, too.

On the walk back home, I saw them coming out of a Hardee's. He had his arm around her. They were laughing. I was ready to fight now. Just walk right up to him and punch him in the freaking chops. He'd be the one sitting down on his butt this time, not me. And I'd remind her that she still owed me an apartment cleaning.

Good ole Michele and good ole Bill. That's the thing I've never understood about girls. Hard to imagine a guy more full of himself than Bill. But she obviously thought he was just fine and dandy. Otherwise she wouldn't let him have his arm around her. He was going to sleep with her and then he was going to tell everybody. I wondered how she'd react if I told her.

But I couldn't. Much as I wanted to go over there and tell her what was really going on, I couldn't make my legs move in that direction. Because I could live with my self-image as a geek, a loser, a boy-man, but I could never live with myself as a snitch.

A few days later I signed up for computer classes at the community college. I gave up my room on the rent-due day and moved back

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

home. The folks were glad to have me. I was being responsible. Dad said his buddy Mike could get me on at his supermarket and so he had.

What I did for the next few nights, after bagging groceries till nine o'clock, was glut myself on the past. I still had boxes of old Fangorias and Filmfaxes in my closet and I hauled them out and spread them on the bed and just disappeared into my yesterdays, back to the time when there was no doubt that I was going to Hollywood, no doubt that I'd be working for Roger Corman, no doubt that someday I'd be doing my own films, and no doubt they'd be damned good ones.

But my time machine sprung a leak. I'd get all caught up in being sixteen again and grooving on *Star Wars* and *Planet of the Apes* and *Alien* but then the poison gas of now would seep in through those leaks. And I'd start thinking about Michele and Bill and Spence and how my future seemed settled now—computer courses and a lifelong job in some dusty little computer store in a strip mall somewhere—and then I'd be back to the here and now. And not liking it at all.

On a rainy Friday night, my mom knocked on my door and said, "Spence is downstairs for you, honey."

I hadn't told my folks about the falling out Spence and I had had.

I just said okay and went down to see him. He was talking to my dad. Dad was telling him how happy they were about my taking those computer courses.

I grabbed my jacket and we went out. I hadn't so much as nodded at Spence. In fact, we didn't say a word until we were in his old Dodge Dart and heading down the street.

"How you been?" he said.

"Pretty good."

"Your Dad seems real happy about you being in computer classes."

"Yeah."

"You don't sound so happy, though."

"What's this all about, Spence?"

"What's what all about?"

"'What's what all about?' What do you think it's all about? You took Bill's side on this whole thing. Now you come over to my house."

He didn't say anything for a while. We just drove. Headlights and neon lights and streetlights glowed like watercolors in the rain. Girls looked sweet and young and strong running into cafes and theaters to get out of the downpour. His radio faded in and out. Every couple of minutes he'd slam a fist on the dash and the radio would be all right again for a few minutes. The car smelled of gasoline and mildewed car seats.

"He's getting really weird."

"Who is?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"'Who is?' Who do you think is, Jason? Bill is."

"Weird about what?"

"About her. Michele."

"Weird how?"

"He's really hung up with Michele. He won't tell me what it is but somethin's really buggin' him."

"I'm supposed to feel bad about it?"

"I'm just telling you is all."

"Why? Why would I give a shit?"

He glanced over at me. "I shoulda stuck up for you with Bill. The night he knocked you down, I mean. I'm sorry."

"You really pissed me off."

"Yeah, I know. And I'm sorry. I really am. I—I just can't handle being around Bill anymore. This whole thing with Michele. She's all he talks about and she won't let him do nothin'. He says it's like bein' in sixth grade again."

I wasn't up for just driving around. I'd done enough cruising in my high school years. I said, "You seen that new Wes Craven flick?"

"Huh-uh."

"There'll be a late show. We could still make it."

"So you're not still pissed?"

"Sure I'm still pissed. But I want to see the Wes Craven and you're the only person I know who's got a car."

"I don't blame you for still bein' pissed."

"I don't blame me for still bein' pissed, either."

I didn't hear from Spence till nearly a week later. After the Craven flick, which was damned good, he started talking about other things we could do but I just told him I was busy. Sometimes, friendships, even long ones, just end. One thing happens and you realize that the friendship was never as strong as you'd thought. Or maybe you just realize that you're one cold, unforgiving prick. Whichever it was, I wasn't up for seeing Spence or Bill or Michele for a long time. Maybe never.

I went my glum way to computer classes and my even glummer way to the supermarket.

He was in the supermarket parking lot waiting for me when I got off work. I walked over to his car. It was a warm, smoky October night. Big-ass harvest moon. I wanted to be a kid again in my Halloween costume. I could barely—just quite—remember what it had been like to go trick-or-treating before the days when perverts and sadists hid stick pins and razor blades in candy apples.

I walked over to the driver's side of his car. I wanted to walk home. October nights like this were my favorites.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You doin' anything special?"

"Yeah. Nicole Kidman called. She wants to go get a pizza with me. She said she'll pay for it. And the motel room afterward."

"Remember to bring a condom."

"She's got me covered there, too. She bought a big box of them."

We just looked at each other across an unbreachable chasm of time and pain. He'd been a part of my boyhood. But I wasn't a boy anymore. Not a man yet, to be sure. But not a boy, either.

"He's pretty screwed up."

"We talking about Bill?"

"Yeah. Had the day off. Drinking beers with whiskey chasers."

"Good. We need to drink more. Make sure we're winos before we hit twenty-five."

"I think maybe we should go over to Michele's place."

"Why?"

He stared at the passing cars. When he looked back at me, he said, "You better get in, Jason. This shit could be real bad."

It was one of the little Silverstream trailers that are about as big as an SUV. Except, given its condition, this one should have been called Ruststream. It sat between two large oak trees on a corner where a huge two-story house had been torn down the summer before. The rest of the neighborhood blazed with laughter and throbbing car engines and rap music and folks of both the black and white persuasion filling porches and sidewalks, most of them trying to look and sound like bad-asses. Her trailer was a good quarter block from its nearest neighbor.

Bill's motorcycle leaned against one of the trees. No lights, no sound coming from the trailer.

"Maybe he's getting the job done," Spence said.

"Maybe," I said.

The door was open half an inch. I opened it wide and stuck my head in.

"What the hell you think you're doin'?"

I couldn't see him at first, couldn't see anything except vague furniture shapes. Smells of whiskey and cigarettes. A cat in the gloom, crying now.

"Get out of here, Jason."

"Where's Michele?"

"Where you think she is, asshole?"

"I wanna talk to her."

"I told you once, Jason. Get out of here. I knocked you on your ass once. And I can do it again."

"No, you can't."

Two steps led up to the trailer floor. I was about to set my right foot on the second step when he came at me. My mind had time to register that he was wearing jeans, no shirt, no socks, and he had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a whiskey bottle in his hand.

He tackled me and drove me all the way to the ground. He meant to hit me with the whiskey bottle, but I had the advantage of being sober. He smelled of puke and booze and sex and greasy food, maybe a hamburger.

As the bottle arced downward, I rolled to the right, moving slowly enough to slam my fist hard into the side of Bill's head. The punch dazed him, but not enough to keep him from trying to get me again with the bottle. This time I didn't have time to move away from it. All I could do was grab the wrist and slow the bottle as it descended. It connected, but not hard enough to knock me out. Or to stop me from landing another punch on the same side of his head as before. This one knocked him loose from me. His straddling legs loosened enough to let me buck him off. He went over backwards. He was drunk enough to be confused by all this happening so quickly. Now it was my turn to straddle him. I just wanted to make his face bloody. I hit him until my hands started to hurt, and then I stood up, grabbed him by an arm, and started dragging him to his motorcycle.

"Go get his stuff from inside, okay?" I said to Spence.

He nodded and ran over to the trailer. He didn't need to go inside. Michele was in the doorway, dropping Bill's shoes, socks, shirt, and wallet one by one into Spence's hands. She wore a white terrycloth robe. She had a cigarette going. "You stay with me for a while, Jason?" she said.

"Sure."

By now, Bill was on his motorcycle, roaring it to raucous life. Spence handed him his belongings.

Spence said, "Looks like her nose is busted, man. You do that?"

"Shut up, Spence," Bill said. Then he made his bike louder than I'd ever heard it before. Bill glared at Spence for a long time and said, "I don't know what I ever saw in a pussy like you, Spence. Don't call me anymore."

"You beat her up, man. You don't have to worry about me callin' you."

He roared away, grass and dirt churning from beneath his back wheel. He got all the way down the block before I said anything. "I'll just walk home later, Spence."

"Wait'll you see her, Jason. He beat the shit out of her."

He walked back to the street and drove away.

The light was on in the front part of the trailer now. She was gone from the door. When I sat down at the small table across from her, she pushed a cold can of Bud my way. I thanked her and gunned an ounce or two. My head hurt from where Bill got me with the bottle. She'd fixed up her trailer just the right way—so that you forgot you were in a trailer.

Her delicate nose didn't look broken, as Spence had said, but it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was badly bruised. She had a black eye, a bloody, swollen mouth and her left cheek was bruised.

"Maybe you should go to an ER," I said.

"I'll survive." She made an effort to laugh. "I let him sleep with me but that wasn't enough for him."

"What the hell else did he want?"

"Well, he slept with me, but I wouldn't take my bra or my blouse off. I said I had my reasons and I wanted him to respect them. In some weird way, I'd started to like him. Maybe I was just lonely. I never could pick men for shit. You should've seen some of the losers I went out with in L.A. My girlfriends always used to laugh and say that if there was a serial killer on the dance floor, he'd be the one I'd end up with for the night."

"So you made love and—"

"We made love. I mean, it wasn't the first time. The last couple of weeks, we'd been sleeping together. And he tried real hard to deal with me not taking my top off. I wouldn't let him touch my breasts." She smiled with bloody teeth. "My scream-queen breasts." She shook her head. Or tried. She was halfway through turning her head to the left when she stopped. She had a bad headache, too, apparently. "It was building up. His thing about my breasts. And tonight, afterwards, he just went crazy. Said if I really loved him I'd be completely naked for him. I liked him. But not enough to trust him. You know, with my secret."

She lighted a cigarette with a red plastic lighter. She looked around a bit and then back at me and said, "It's why I left L.A."

"What is?"

"I don't have breasts anymore. I had this really bad kind of breast cancer. I had to have both of them removed." She exhaled through bloody lips. "So how would that be? A scream queen known for her breasts doesn't have any anymore? I went to Eugene, Oregon to get the diagnosis. I kind've suspected I had breast cancer. I didn't want anybody in L.A to know. I paid cash, gave a fake name, they didn't have any idea who I was. I had the double mastectomy there, too. I had some money saved and I used it to disappear. I just couldn't've handled all the publicity. All the bullshit about my breasts inspiring all these young boys—and then not having them anymore. You know how the tabloids are. And then do a couple of weepy interviews on TV. So I've just been traveling around. And I'll be doing more traveling tomorrow. Because I know Bill will call some reporter or tabloid or somebody like that. I just don't want to face it."

She said, "C'mere, okay?"

I stood up and walked over to her. My knees trembled. I didn't know why.

She took my right hand and guided it to her chest and then slid it inside the terrycloth so that I could feel the scarring from the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mastectomy. I wanted to jerk my hand away. I'd never felt anything like that before. But then a tenderness came over me and I let my hand linger and then she eased my hand out of her robe and kissed my fingers, as if she was grateful.

Then she started sobbing, and it was pretty bad, and I said everything I knew to say but it didn't do any good so I steered her into bed and just lay with her there in the darkness and we held hands and she talked about it all, everything from the day she first felt the tiny lump on the underside of her left breast to being so afraid she'd die from the anesthetic—she'd had an uncle who died while being put under, died right there on the table—and how she went through depression so bad she lost twenty-five pounds in three months and how that then turned around and became the opposite kind of eating disorder, this relentless urge to gorge, which she was battling now.

In the morning, I helped her load her car. She didn't have all that much. I told her I'd pay the rent off with the money she gave me and return the key. She kissed me then for the first and only time—the kind of kiss your sister would give you—and then she was gone.

The story hit one of the supermarket papers three weeks later. She'd been right. The story dealt with the irony of a girl who'd been made into a scream queen at least partly because of her beautiful breasts losing them to cancer. A minister somewhere said that it was God's wrath, exploiting your body for filthy Hollywood money, and then getting your just desserts. You know how God's people like to talk.

As for me . . . tomorrow I'm flying to L.A. My dad has a friend out there who owns a video company that produces training films for various companies. Not exactly Paramount pictures, or even Roger Corman. But a start. My folks even gave me five thousand dollars as seed money. They're pretty sure that in a year I'll be back here. And maybe they're right . . .

It's funny about Michele. I watch her old videos all the time. That's how I prefer to remember her. It's not because of her breasts. It's because of that lovely girly radiance that was in her eyes and her smile back in those days.

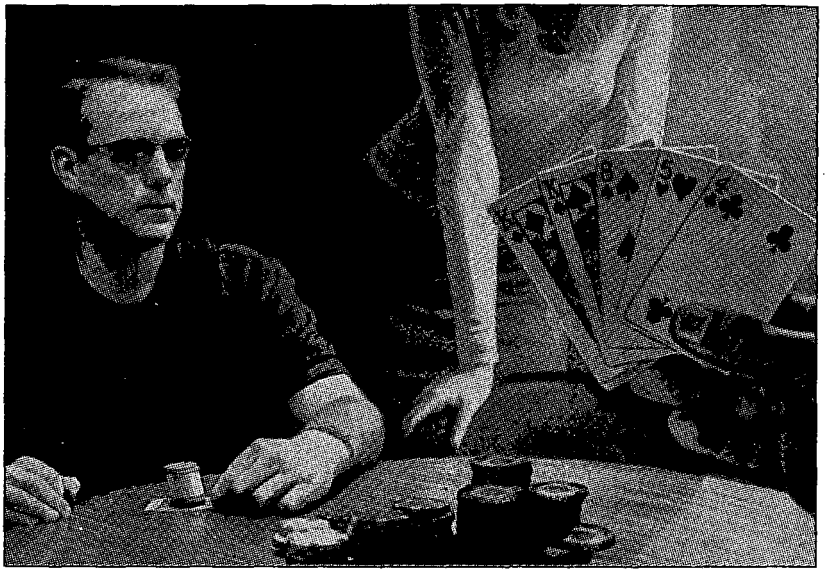
I still watch them and I'm sure Spence does, too. He got a job in Chicago and moved there a couple months back. Bill joined the Army. I wonder if he still watches them.

But most of all I wonder if Michele ever watches them. Probably not.

Not now, anyway. But maybe someday. ●

ERRATUM: In the June 2007 *EQMM,* in the introduction to "The Robber's Grave," the author byline, Paul Halter, was said to be a pseudonym. It is in fact the author's real name. The introduction also omitted mention of a new book of Halter stories, *The Night of the Wolf* (Wildside Press), which is now available in English.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Mark Evans

A Chance to Get Even

by Lawrence Block

A little after midnight, Gordon Benning, a balding gastroenterologist with a perpetually dyspeptic expression on his long face, announced as he dealt the cards that his next deal would be his final hand. Several players indicated their agreement, and one, a CPA with a propensity for stating the obvious, said, "So this is the last round."

And so it was. Richard Krale (Dick to his friends, Richard to his wife, who reserved the diminutive for a specific portion of her husband) would have preferred it otherwise. He wished the game could go on for another three hours, so that he might recoup his losses, or that it had ended three hours earlier, when he'd been briefly ahead. Now he had, what? Six, seven hands to get even?

The game was dealer's choice, and ninety percent of the time the choice was seven-card stud. The dealer anteed a buck for the table, the limit was five dollars, ten dollars on the last card. (The same betting rules applied in five-card stud. In draw poker, the bet was five dollars before the draw, ten dollars after.)

Krale was the host, as well as being the evening's big loser. In the latter capacity more than the former, he suggested doubling the

©2007 by Lawrence Block

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

betting limits for the final round. That was all right with Mark Taggert, who had a mountain of chips in front of him, but the other players shook their heads dismissively, and that was that. It was by no means unusual for someone, generally the biggest loser, to make this suggestion; it was always voted down.

And that was just as well for Krale, as it turned out, because his luck was no better in the last round than it had been for the preceding three hours. It was worse, if anything, because desperation led him to play hands he'd have been well advised to fold at their onset, and to stay to the end in hands where he should have cut his losses. When Benning dealt the last hand of the evening, Krale chased flush and straight possibilities, backed into two pair, queens over fives, tried to buy the pot with a raise, and lost to Taggert's three sixes.

"Hey, the night's a pup," he said. "No reason to quit now."

No one even bothered to respond. They were all counting their chips and figuring out what they had coming, and in turn they announced their totals and waited for Krale to pay them. He'd set aside the cash they'd all bought in with, and when that was gone he still had two players to pay off—Norm McLeod, who had $120 coming, and Taggert, who'd had a very good last round.

He dug out his wallet, counted out five twenties and a pair of tens, and paid McLeod, who looked almost apologetic as he pocketed the money. Taggert, who looked not at all apologetic, announced that the chips in front of him came to $538.

"Stick around," Krale said. "I'll have to write you a check."

The others left, and Krale shook their hands and wished them well. Then he took his time finding his checkbook.

"Some run of cards," he said.

"You caught a lot of second-best hands," Taggert said. "Nothing much you can do when that happens but wait for the cards to turn."

"They never did."

"There's always next week."

"I hate to wait that long," Krale said. He'd uncapped the pen but had not as yet touched it to the check. "You in a rush to get home?"

"You want to play some more?"

"I wouldn't mind."

"Heads up, you mean? Just the two of us?"

Lawrence Block, novelist and short story writer par excellence, was also the editor, in 2006, of one of Akashic's city-themed titles, *Manhattan Noir.* Said *Booklist:* "The volumes are uneven, but when the right editor sits at the desk, the results can be well worthwhile, as is the case here." Mr. Block's latest novel is *Lucky at Cards* (Hard Case Crime). †

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Krale made a show of looking to his left and right, then at Taggert. "I don't see anybody else here," he said, "so I guess we're stuck with each other."

Taggert thought about it. "I'll just keep these chips, then."

"Right. And I'll help myself from the bank." He did so, stacking the chips in front of him, giving himself a bigger bankroll than Taggert's. That would help psychologically, he told himself. The player with fewer chips was at a disadvantage, doomed to play with a loser's mentality. This way he could feel like a winner, and it was only a matter of time before he'd be one.

Taggert didn't seem awed by Krale's chips. He rearranged his own stacks, and for some reason the new arrangement made it look to Krale as though there were more of them.

"Same rules?"

Krale nodded. "Except we can forget about the three-raise limit," he said. "Since there's just the two of us."

"Makes sense."

"How about a drink before we get started?"

"Good idea," Taggert said.

Krale went to the bar and poured a brandy for each of them. They sat with their drinks, and he suggested they cut for deal, and then his wife walked into the room. She said, "Hi, hon. I hope it went—" and stopped in midsentence when she realized her husband had company.

"Hello, Tina."

"Mark," she said. "I'm sorry, I wouldn't have come in if I'd known you were still here."

"What's the matter, don't you love me anymore?"

She grinned. "I know better than to interrupt you boys. Poker's a serious matter."

"Oh, it's not all that serious," Taggert said. "We just pretend it's serious so that we can keep up our interest in it. Like war or business."

"I see."

"Mark's the big winner," Krale said, "and he's giving me a chance to win some of my money back."

"You'll probably win it all back," Taggert said, "and then some."

"Not unless the cards turn."

"They always do, sooner or later."

"Well," Tina Krale said. "Is it all right if I wish you both good luck?"

When she left the room, Taggert's eyes lingered on her retreating form. This did not go unnoticed by Krale.

They cut cards to determine who'd deal the first hand, and Krale was high.

"Look at that," Taggert said. "The cards are turning already."

But his tone was ironic, and it was clear to Krale that he didn't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

believe it. Taggert expected to go on winning for as long as Krale sat across the table from him. As though it wasn't a matter of luck, or cards, or the breaks of the game. As though it was all predetermined by the character of the players, and winners won while losers lost, and he was a winner as sure as Krale was a loser.

A loser with a big house and a going business and money in the bank. A loser with a beautiful wife.

But a loser all the same.

The big house was mortgaged to the rafters. The money in the bank came to less than the outstanding bills. The going business . . . well, it was going, all right. Going broke, going to hell in a handbasket, going, barring a miracle, out of business. Going, going, gone.

And the beautiful wife?

Krale took a deep breath and dealt the cards.

Half a dozen rounds in, Taggert dealt and Krale looked at a deuce and six to go with the ten he had showing. Different suits, of course. "Check," he said, and Taggert shook his head.

"Oh, right," Krale said. They'd changed the rules to avoid hands that got checked to excess, and whoever was high had to make a first-round bet. "Bet," he said, unnecessarily, and tossed a chip into the pot.

His next card paired the six. This time he was entitled to check, and did, but Taggert bet, and the pair of sixes kept him in the hand. He kept having enough to call, and the ten he caught on the river gave him two pair, and he knew his tens up were beat but called the last bet anyway, because he had so much in the pot already, and Taggert had kings up and won the hand.

He gathered up the cards, shuffled them. "Maybe we should raise the stakes," he suggested.

"Sure," Taggert said. "What do you say we make the raise retroactive?"

"Very funny."

"I've got a better idea, Dick. Why don't we call it a night?"

"I thought you were going to give me a chance to get even."

"At this rate, that'll take awhile."

"So we'll raise the stakes."

"To what?"

"We've been playing five and ten. Let's up it to ten-twenty."

"Fine with me," Taggert said.

At first he thought raising the stakes was the charm. He won three small pots in a row, got out of a fourth hand with an early fold, and then, after staying in too long with an unmade hand, caught the king of hearts for a flush while Taggert, who'd held three queens all the way, failed to catch his full house. He bet the hand, too, and pulled in a handsome pot.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well played," Taggert said. Krale glowed, even though he knew he hadn't really played the hand well. He shouldn't have stayed long enough to catch that king, and he'd had no business betting into Taggert at the end. He'd been lucky, lucky to catch the king, lucky that Taggert hadn't filled.

But wasn't that as good as playing smart? In fact, wasn't it better? Because it meant that the cards were turning, that his luck was returning, and that he could get even and then some. Wouldn't it be nice if the evening ended with Taggert writing a check to him instead of the other way around?

Taggert yawned. Because he was tired? Or because he wanted to appear tired, so he'd have an excuse to end the game?

"Hang on a sec," Krale said.

He left without an explanation and came back a few minutes later with a glass of brandy for each of them. "A little pick-me-up," he said. "And how do you take your coffee? Tina's making a fresh pot."

"I don't like to drink coffee after dinner," Taggert said. "It screws up my sleeping."

"I find they smooth one another out," Krale said. "The coffee and the brandy. Keeps you awake while you're at the table, then lets you sleep like a baby when you get home."

"And in the morning?"

"You wake up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and ready to do battle."

Taggert raised an eyebrow. "You've made a study of this," he said.

"Personal observation," he said, "along with an exhaustive study of the available literature." He raised his glass, and Taggert, after a moment, raised his.

You had to expect the occasional setback. You couldn't sit there and win every hand. But this one hurt.

He'd started with nines rolled up, two down and one up, trip nines, gorgeous cards. And he'd nursed them along, played them just right, while Taggert got enough of a diamond flush to keep him in the hand. And on sixth street Krale stopped caring about Taggert's diamonds, because he caught a pair for the five he had showing, which gave him a full house, so who cared if Taggert had his flush?

With the river cards dealt, he bet and Taggert raised, which made him very happy, and he raised back and so did Taggert, and now he wasn't all that happy. Taggert had four diamonds showing, and there was no way he could have a straight flush, not with the five and nine of diamonds in Krale's hand, but neither was there any way Taggert could make that second raise with nothing better than a flush.

So Krale called, and Taggert turned over a pair of tens that matched one of his diamonds and an eight that matched another, giving him tens full, which, alas, beat Krale's nines full.

He sat there, trying to catch his breath, watching Taggert pull in the pot, and that was when Tina came in with the coffee.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"And I made sandwiches," she said. "I figured you boys must have worked up an appetite by now."

Appetite? If there was one thing Krale didn't have, besides the fourth nine, it was an appetite. He felt a hollowness in his middle, but had no urge whatsoever to try to fill it. He didn't want the coffee, either, and as for the brandy, well, he'd already swallowed it, and all he could hope was that it would stay down.

He excused himself, and as he left the room he heard Tina asking Taggert if something was wrong. He didn't catch Taggert's reply.

Nines full, carefully nursed along, with every bet calculated to get the maximum amount of money in the pot. Everything was perfect about that hand except the outcome.

He tried to look at the bright side, but there didn't seem to be one. At least he hadn't raised one more time. He could have been stubborn enough to throw another twenty dollars in the pot, in which case Taggert would certainly have bumped him again. So, yes, he'd managed to save forty dollars, but was that a bright side? Glimpsing it, would one be well advised to pop on a pair of sunglasses?

Krale didn't think so.

He went to the bathroom, the one at the back of the house off the master bedroom, so that they wouldn't hear him gagging. He decided he might feel better if he threw up, but as it turned out he couldn't throw up, nor did he feel better.

On the way back, he stopped in the den and opened the upper left-hand drawer of his desk. It was the one with the lock, although the key had been misplaced years ago. So it was never locked, but still it was the natural place to keep a gun, and that's where Krale kept his .38-caliber revolver. He took it out, held it in one hand and then the other, swung out the cylinder to make sure that all its chambers were loaded, closed the cylinder again, and held the gun to his temple, then put the barrel in his mouth.

And how would it play?

They'd hear the shot. They'd run in, see him. And then?

It'd almost be worth it if he could see the expressions on their faces. Tina, who typically looked as if she was trying not to look disappointed, would show some other, more forceful emotion on her beautiful face. And Taggert's habitual poker face would almost certainly lose its composure, if only for a moment.

But he wouldn't get to see it. He'd be dead, with his brains spattered on one wall or another, depending which way he faced when he pulled the trigger. And he wouldn't know whether they laughed or cried.

So what was the point? Well, he'd be out of it. There was that. The pain, which might be quite bad for a moment there, would stop, once and for all. But was that reason enough to do it?

You can kill yourself, he thought. Or you can go back to the table

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and take that sonofabitch for everything he's got.

He returned the gun to the drawer. On his way to the table, he found himself wondering if he'd made the right choice.

He began winning.

It wasn't terribly dramatic. Most of the pots were small ones, and he couldn't get any real momentum, but he was gaining ground, inching along, taking two steps forward and one back.

"Slow going," he said, when Taggert folded after receiving his second up card. "Maybe we should raise the stakes."

"Oh?"

"Make it twenty-five and fifty," he suggested.

Taggert frowned. "Let me think about it," he said, and reached for the cards. "I'm not sure how much longer I want to play."

"Come on," Krale said. "The night is young."

"Well, I'm not, and it's past my bedtime. And the trouble with a two-handed game is you're always either dealing or shuffling. It's a pain in the ass, passing the cards back and forth all night long."

He opened his mouth to protest, but knew that Taggert was right. "What we need," he said, "is a house dealer."

"Yeah, right," Taggert said. "Why not wish for a full range of casino perks while you're at it?"

"I'm serious," Krale said. He got to his feet, called out, "Tina!"

"We'll stick to seven-card stud," he said. "That's what we've been playing anyway, nine hands out of ten. Tina, you know how to deal stud, don't you? Two down cards, four up cards, one down card."

"What about the ante? We've been playing dealer ante, and if we don't take turns dealing—"

"What do we need with an ante?" Krale said. "Remember, the high hand's compelled to bet the first round, and that's enough to get the pot started. Tina deals the blue cards, and while we play the hand she shuffles the red cards. You don't mind, do you?"

"It might even be fun," she said.

"And while we're at it," Krale said, "we can up the stakes to twenty-five and fifty."

Taggert shook his head.

"Twenty-forty? If you insist, although I'd just as soon boost it a little bit higher."

"I was thinking we could make the first bet five dollars," Taggert said.

"Five dollars!"

"And make the betting pot limit. That way you don't bleed away too much on hands that fizzle out on fourth street, and the big hands are really big."

"Pot limit," Krale said. "Well, hell, why not?"

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He found out the answer to that question when his three jacks ran headlong into a small straight. He'd been moving up nicely, banking a string of small pots, and the straight killed him.

He sat there, working to maintain his composure while Taggert pulled in the pot. Midway through the task of stacking them, he picked up a blue chip and tossed it to Tina.

"One thing I learned in Atlantic City," he said. "A pot like that, you damn well tip the dealer."

She picked up the chip, looked at it.

"It's a joke," Krale said. "Give it back."

"It's not a joke," Taggert said. "You keep it, Teen."

Teen?

"Well, thanks," she said, and grinned, and tucked the chip into her cleavage.

And all at once Krale didn't mind losing.

The cards didn't favor either of them, not really. The hands tended to average out. Krale sat there and played what Tina dealt him, and he won his share of hands, pulled in his share of pots.

But two hands killed him. Two moves, really. In one hand, he limped along with four small spades, filled his flush on sixth street, and called a big bet because Taggert needed the case nine for a full house, that was his only out, and Krale just didn't believe he had it.

Wrong.

A little while later, he just flat knew Taggert had a busted flush, and no backup pair for his pair of aces. The aces were enough to beat Krale's jacks, but how could Taggert call a big bet if all he had was aces?

Wrong again. Right about the unsupported aces, but the sonofabitch called all the same, and aces beat jacks, the way they always do.

Beaten, Krale didn't curse his luck, or the cards, or Taggert. What he did do was note the expression on Taggert's face, and the one on Tina's, and the look that passed between them.

"Kills me," he announced. "How you made that call . . . well, I guess that's poker."

"Maybe it's time to call it a night."

"Maybe," Krale said, and found that he could read Taggert now as if the man had subtitles etched on his forehead. Because Taggert didn't want to quit. He'd wanted to earlier, but not now.

Nice.

"All I want," Krale said, "is a chance to get even."

"Seems reasonable."

"But I'm running out of money to play with. If I had to write you a check for what I owe you right this minute, I'd have to do some fancy footwork to keep it from bouncing."

"I hate to take a marker," Taggert said, "but in this case—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I hate to give one. Here's my thought. I'm going to stake myself to a thousand dollars' worth of chips. If I win, I win. And if I lose the lot . . ."

He had their attention.

" . . . then you can take Tina in the bedroom," he said, "and play dealer's choice for as long as you want."

"You know, if I thought you were serious—"

"Oh, he's serious," Tina said.

"Really? Dick, don't you figure Tina has some say in the matter?"

"Tina wouldn't mind."

"Is that true, Teen?"

Teen.

"You sonofabitch," she said to Krale. "No," she said to Taggert. "No, Mark, I wouldn't mind."

At first they took turns picking up small pots. The cards were uninteresting, and the hands generally ended with the second up card, but Krale could feel the game's level of intensity rise in spite of the cards.

Fifteen or twenty minutes in, Tina dealt Krale a pair of tens in the hole and a seven on board. Taggert's face card was a queen; he bet and Krale called.

On the next round, Krale paired his seven while Taggert picked up a king. Krale bet, Taggert called.

Krale caught a ten on fifth street, filling his hand, while Taggert paired his king and made a medium-size bet. He had kings and queens, Krale decided, and didn't want to chase Krale out of the pot. Krale thought it over and called.

Taggert's next card was a queen. Two pair on board, and Krale read him for a boat.

His own card was a ten, giving him two pair showing.

"Maybe you're not full yet," Taggert said, and bet into him.

Maybe you're not full yet. Like it mattered to Taggert, who clearly was full himself, with a boat that would swamp tens full or sevens full or anything Krale might have.

Krale just called.

And Tina dealt the river cards. Krale looked at his, for form's sake, and it was a queen, which meant that Taggert couldn't have four of them. He could still have four kings, though.

Taggert made a show of looking at his river card, squeezing it out between his other two down cards. Nothing showed on his face. He sat there considering, and pushed chips into the pot.

"Here's your chance to double up," he said. "My bet's whatever you've got in front of you."

"Oh, what the hell," Krale said. "Let's get this over with." And he shoved his chips to the middle of the table. "I call, Mark. What have you got?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Big surprise—Taggert showed a king and a queen, giving him the full house Krale had read him for all along.

"Kings full," Krale said. He felt the blood in his veins, felt energy pulsing through his body. He noted the way Taggert was trying not to look at Tina, and the way Tina was allowing herself to look at Taggert. And then he turned over one of the two tens he had in the hole.

"Tens full," he announced. "I just didn't believe you had it, Mark." He dropped his other two hole cards facedown on the table, mixed them in with the pack Tina had been dealing from.

He stood up. "That's it," he said. "Enjoy yourselves, kids. You deserve it."

He poured himself a brandy and held the glass to the light while he listened to their footsteps on the staircase.

Now they're at the top of the stairs, he thought. *Now they're in the bedroom, our bedroom. Now he's kissing her, now he's got his hand on her ass, now she's pressing herself into him the way she does.*

He sipped the brandy.

Suppose Taggert had caught a fourth king. Then he could have shown the fourth ten, and he'd still be sipping brandy and they'd still be up in the bedroom.

He thought about them up there, and he took another small sip of brandy.

Better this way, he decided. Better that he'd had the winning hand and refrained from showing it. This way he had a secret, and he liked that.

Noble of him. Self-sacrificing.

He finished the brandy, went to his desk, opened the upper left-hand drawer, took out the gun. Assured himself once again that all the chambers were loaded.

Another brandy?

No, he didn't need it.

He was quiet on the stairs, avoiding the one that creaked. Not that they'd be likely to hear him, not that they'd be paying attention to anything but each other.

He walked the length of the hall. They hadn't bothered to close the door. He saw their clothes, scattered here and there, and then he saw them, looking for all the world like Internet porn.

He approached to within ten feet of the bed. He was within Tina's peripheral vision, and he could tell when she registered his presence. She froze, and then so did Taggert.

"Nice," Krale said.

They looked at him, and saw his face, his poker face, and then they saw the gun.

God, the look on their faces!

"I had four tens," Krale said. "So you both lose."●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE JURY BOX (continued from p. 25)
on a charge of directing the suicide-bomber assassination of the prime minister of Israel. Of the books under review, this is easily the first choice for trial buffs, with a hundred pages of excellent courtroom give and take. A thorough and even-handed airing of both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute adds interest to a large-canvas novel with enough matter to justify its 556 pages. In this case, the romantic complications and travelogue notes often used for padding are an organic part of the whole.

*** Mercedes Lambert: *Ghosttown,* Five Star, $25.95. The third novel about Los Angeles attorney Whitney Logan, following *Dogtown* (1991) and *Soultown* (1996), had been seeking a publisher for several years when the author (pseudonym of Douglas Anne Munson) died in 2003. The portrait of the dark side of L.A. is superbly done, and both Whitney and her film-crazed ex-prostitute legal secretary Lupe Ramos are engaging characters. Client Tony Red Wolf, a member of the city's large Native American community, is accused of the beheading murder of Shirley Yellow-bird. The case is solved, but the highly unconventional ending, open to varying interpretations, will delight some readers while disturbing or irritating others. Michael Connelly writes a brief introduction, and the author's literary executor, Lucas Crown, details the author's difficult life in a lengthy afterword.

*** Harlan Coben: *The Woods,* Dutton, $26.95. New Jersey county attorney Paul Copeland, while raising a six-year-old daughter as a single parent, explores various mysteries of his family's past, notably his teenage sister's disappearance and presumed murder at the hands of a serial killer decades before, and prosecutes two rich white college boys accused of raping a black stripper. Whatever you think of the combination of wise-guy humor (including bizarre character names like Flair Hickory and Cingle Shaker) and heart-on-the-sleeve emotion, Coben's gift for complex plotting and compulsive readability cannot be denied.

** Paul Levine: *Trial and Error,* Bantam, $6.99. In their fourth appearance, Miami lawyers Steve Solomon and Victoria Lord, partners and lovers, wind up on opposite sides when she is appointed to prosecute Gerald Nash, nephew of the State's Attorney, on a felony murder charge. Allegedly, Nash's accomplice in a dolphin liberation was shot by the aquatic theme park's owner. As usual, Levine is very funny, and the story moves along nicely until the professional and personal climaxes sacrifice credibility for feel-good tidiness.

** Michele Martinez: *Cover-Up,* Morrow, $23.95. In her third case, federal prosecutor Melanie Vargas investigates the mutilation murder of Suzanne Shepard, a New York TV personality who exposes celebrity scandals. The plot and procedural details are interesting enough, but the hyped-up suspense and soap-opera elements are overdone,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the prose and dialogue mostly flat. An exception is this wicked morsel of media satire, a comment from the victim's producer: "We believe the best way to honor Suzanne's memory is with innovative coverage of her murder. Please don't interfere with our grieving process."

*** Lloyd Biggle, Jr.: *The Grandfather Rastin Mysteries,* Crippen & Landru, $29 hardback, $19 trade paper. The octogenarian sleuth of Borgville, Michigan, first appeared in a 1957 issue of *AHMM* and made eleven appearances in *EQMM* between 1959 and 1972. These dozen are joined by two previously unpublished additions to a small-town series offering warmth, charm, and devious plotting. The first eight have headnotes by the author, who died in 2002, and his children contribute a brief introduction.

*** Aaron Elkins: *Little Tiny Teeth,* Berkley, $23.95. Skeleton Detective Gideon Oliver joins an Amazon River cruise arranged by a secrets-bearing botany professor surrounded by those who hate him most. Elkins has done stronger puzzle plots, but background and humor carry the day. The introduction to the travelers of the spaced-out expedition guide is one of the funniest scenes in recent memory.

From Rue Morgue Press come reprints of two books that are recent by the publisher's preservationist standards: Stuart Palmer's 1951 Hildegarde Withers novel *Nipped in the Bud* ($14.95) and Catherine Aird's 1967 English village mystery *A Most Contagious Game* ($14.95). Both contain introductory notes by publishers Tom and Enid Schantz. ●

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Ellery Queen September/October 2007

Advertise to the world's largest mystery magazine audience with our Ellery Queen/Alfred Hitchcock combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: $4.95 per word (10 word minimum), $350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). Special introductory offer: Buy two ads and receive a third ad FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, New York 10016. Direct inquiries to: (212) 686-7188; Fax: (212) 686-7414; or email: adsales@dellmagazines.com

AUTHORS

ENEMY MINE, All books in print, Check: www.barrylongyear.net

MERCHANDISE

Murder Mystery Theme Party Game Kits for 4-400 Guests! www.dinnerandamurder.com

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

Marlowe's Mysteries. Mystery books and more, for the collector and reader. www.marlowesmysteries.com.

Jaggers and Shad Mysteries Appearing in: ANALOG www.jaggersandshad.com

TRAVEL/TOURS

MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE 20th annual MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE, April 16, 2008. Ten day Hawaiian cruise aboard Norwegian Cruise Line's Pride of Aloha. Call CruiseWorks – 1 800 876-6664

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE...

Popping Round to the Post
BY PETER LOVESEY

Devoured
BY RUTH FRANCISCO

The Judas Clue
BY TERENCE FAHERTY

The Best Revenge
BY BRENDAN DUBOIS

Visit us at:
www.themysteryplace.com

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 130, Nos. 3&4. Whole Nos. 793 & 794, September/October 2007. USPS 523-610, ISSN 0013-6328. Dell GST: R123054108. Published monthly except for combined March/April and September/October double issues by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription $43.90 in U.S.A. and possessions, $53.90 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-220-7443 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Editorial Offices, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. Executive Offices 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and at additional mailing offices. © 2007 Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Dell is a trademark registered in the U.S. Patent Office. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Submissions must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. In Canada return to Quebecor St. Jean, 800 Blvd. Industrial, St. Jean, Quebec J3B 8G4. For back issues, send your check for $5.00 (U.S. funds) to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add $2 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

PRINTED IN CANADA

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

JANET HUTCHINGS
Editor

EMILY GIGLIERANO
Editorial Assistant

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI
Executive Director,
Art & Production

VICTORIA GREEN
Senior Art Director

IRENE LEE
Production Artist/
Graphic Designer

CAROLE DIXON
Senior Production Manager

EVIRA MATOS
Production Associate

ABIGAIL BROWNING
Manager, Subsidiary Rights
& Marketing

BRUCE W. SHERBOW
Vice President,
Sales & Marketing

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

JULIA McEVOY
Manager, Advertising Sales

PETER KANTER
Publisher

ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
CONNIE GOON
Advertising Sales Coordinator
Phone: (212) 686-7188
Fax: (212) 686-7414
(Display and Classified Advertising)

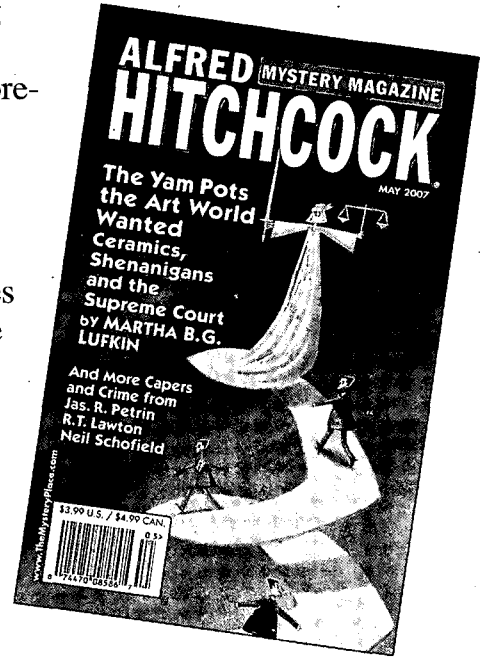
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SUBSCRIBE AND SAVE 50%!

Now get 6 issues of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine delivered conveniently to your door and SAVE 50% off the newsstand price!

You'll receive 6 entertaining issues* full of suspenseful stories, including never-before-published works by world renowned mystery writers.

That's over $21.00 worth of delightful mystery magazines delivered right to your home for just $10.97!
You save over $10.00!



Order today and SAVE!

To charge your order to MC or Visa, call
TOLL-FREE 1-800-220-7443
(8am-7pm EST) Orders only, please!

BY MAIL

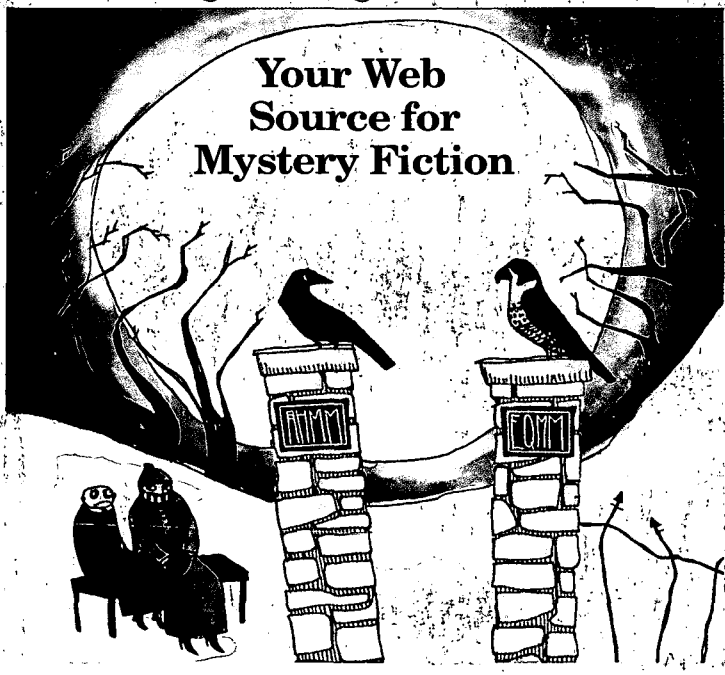
Alfred Hitchcock, Suite S, 6 Prowitt St.
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside U.S.A.: Add $10 per year for shipping and handling (U.S. funds). WA residents: Add state and local taxes to your total order. *We publish double issues twice a year which count as four issues toward your subscription.
Offer expires 12/31/08.

47C-NZPFL2

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TheMysteryPlace.com



Visit www.TheMysteryPlace.com, home of the world's leading short-fiction mystery magazines. Log on and enjoy:

- **Excerpts of current stories from the genre's leading authors**
- **Readers' Forum**
- **Awards lists**
- **Book reviews**
- **Mystery puzzles**

All this and much more!

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE®

ELLERY QUEEN® MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Visit us at www.themysteryplace.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED